The Schoolmaster of Hessville

HELEN R. MARTIN

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BY

HELEN R. MARTIN

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THE SCHOOLMASTER OF HESSVILLE

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CHAPTER I

AS JOHN WIMMER, the young school teacher of the village, drove up in his buggy to the door of his sweetheart's home at the end of the one long street of Hessville, he was shocked and astonished to see Irene waiting for him on the porch in her blue calico working dress instead of her new lavender flowered voile with straw hat trimmed with lavender flowers to match. Inasmuch as his imagination had been playing with that lovely picture of her all the morning, it was disconcerting to find her, this afternoon, in blue calico—though, to be sure, even in that she was a sight to make a man tremble.

"Och, I don't feel fur goin' to the circus," she replied to his surprised question as to why she was not ready.

Her tone was as *blasé* as that of a fashion-weary Newport hostess at the end of the season and she tossed her beautiful head as haughtily as though a circus were not to her a social function of distinction and delight. "I have tired of circuses."

"But I got the tickets a'ready, Irene!" said John, a troubled look in his kind eyes. "You said you wanted to go. So I went to town yesterday as early as I otherwise could, and got 'em."

Irene noted the conspicuous fact that John did not, apparently, feel called upon to tell her what the tickets had cost which she would so lightly discard. She had previously noted often that he never told her what he had paid for the gifts which, from time to time, he brought to her and which were, of course, a necessary part of his courtship. This uncommunicativeness annoyed her. The price of a gift was nearly the most interesting thing about it. What a suitor's courtship cost him in dollars and cents was as important to Irene as his morals and his earning power. She wondered at John's silence on such a vital matter. Other young men of Hessville never left their "girls" in painful doubt about it. It was not, she was sure, that John considered it unimportant; that he was indifferent to money. He was indeed very prudent. And she could see that he was troubled just now at the idea of wasting the sum he had invested in the tickets.

Irene was quite incapable of understanding the incipient fineness in John which gave him standards and reticences somewhat different from those of his fellow villagers.

"Circuses is stale to me," she said flippantly. "I ain't goin'."

"I thought you liked 'em," said John dejectedly.

"Och, I got too used to 'em."

"They say they're got elephants in this circus trained to talk in the telephone. That's somepin you'd mebby like to see, Irene."

"I don't take no special interest in elephants talkin' in telephones. I used to like better to see the ladies in pink tights that rode bare back—before I got so used to 'em. No, I don't want to go."

"But what made you change your mind? You said yesterday——"

"Och, John, quit tellin' me what I said yesterday! Yesterday is yesterday and to-day is to-day!" retorted Irene, who would risk missing a circus for the fun of tormenting her lover and trying out the large limits of her power over him.

"All right," said John resignedly. "If you won't, you won't, I guess. It's a girl's way, mebby, to want a thing one day and not want it the next. Ain't?"

"Whether it's a girl's way or whether it ain't, makes me nothing. Quit botherin' me, John!"

It was because her tones were so dulcet, her cheeks so creamy and pink, her eyes, though shallow, so soft and blue, her curly hair so golden a brown, that her perversity seemed, to big, strong John Wimmer, the most charming girlishness.

"Of course I don't want you to go if you don't feel like going, Irene," he said. "It was to give you pleasure that I got the tickets; not to bother you."

"I wonder how often you'll think of givin' me

pleasure after we're married oncet!" said Irene, looking coquettish, but speaking derisively. "It'll be—'*You stay home and do the housework!*' after you're got me oncet—ain't it will?"

"You don't know me if you think that, Irene!"

"I know what men are!" said Irene darkly.

"I don't wonder you don't think much of 'em," John admitted.

It seemed to him, as he contemplated her young loveliness, that no man living was worthy to take into his coarse and clumsy keeping such an exquisite thing.

"If you're sure you don't want to go," he began—but she cut him short.

"If I'm sure? Och, John, how many times must I say it till you know it?"

It was his invariable yielding to her whims that tempted her to go to such lengths in testing him. She was really dying to go to the circus; she knew perfectly well that she was treating him shabbily to have consented yesterday to his getting the tickets and now to-day, for no reason but her love of being perverse, to refuse to go. Her dread lest he take her at her word and desist from coaxing her to go with him, before she could yield with grace, added to her sharpness toward him.

"It ain't no use fur you to plague me!" she persisted.

"All right, then, will you come out buggy-riding?"

"I ain't dressed to."

"Till you get dressed a'ready, I'll go take the circus tickets 'round to Minnie Maus. She and her father can use 'em."

"Minnie Maus and her pop can't afford the trolley fare to town," Irene quickly objected.

"I'll give 'em the trolley fare."

"What fur do you want to throw away your money on other folks?"

"But it'll save the tickets from getting wasted, to leave Minnie and her father use 'em. I'd hate to have no one get the use of 'em. I got such *re*-served seats, too."

"Oh!" cried Irene sharply, "I never have sat in them *re*-served seats yet! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was goin' to surprise you with 'em. Will you go then?"

Irene tossed her head. "*Re*-served seats ain't so much!"

"All right then, I'll hurry round and give Minnie Maus the tickets before it gets too late on me."

"Minnie Maus is a Mennonite—she darsen't go to circuses," argued Irene desperately.

"That's so, too—I didn't think of that. But she ain't very strict—I'll anyhow drive round and ask her. You be ready to go on the buggy till I come back again. Ain't, you will?"

"I don't know if I will. If I feel fur it I will. If I don't feel fur it I won't!"

She wanted tremendously to yield and sit in those

exclusive reserved seats. But she could not see her way to it with any vestige of dignity.

"I'll hurry," said John, going quickly across the pavement to his buggy. "Good-bye till I come again!" he called back, throwing her a kiss as he drove away. He was madly in love with her—as was, indeed, nearly every young man of the village.

Irene sat tense for an instant; then suddenly an idea flashed upon her—she saw how she could, without coming down from her high horse, not only go to the circus, but further torment John. Springing up from the porch, she rushed into her father's "General Store," adjoining her home, and seized the telephone. The store was empty, the proprietor not deeming it necessary to "mind" it when nearly everyone in Hessville was getting ready to go to town to the circus.

In a moment Irene was connected with the Maus home at the other end of the village, toward which John was driving. Telephones were not common in private homes of Hessville, but a grateful patient of the quack, "Doc" Maus, had installed one in his house.

"I want your brother Hen," Irene curtly informed Minnie Maus who answered the telephone.

"Say, Hen," she spoke to that young man, "John Wimmer's on his way to your house with two circus tickets and such *re*-served seats, fur Minnie and your pop. Now, listen here! You make Minnie accept

'em off of John fur *you* and then you come on round here fur the show, will you?"

"You bet you!" exclaimed Hen. "But why don't *he* take you?"

"I'll tell you on the way to the circus. You tell Minnie right aways. Don't you or her leave on to John that I phoned! Do you get me?"

"Yes, I get you!" returned Henry eagerly.

"Then hurry! Good-bye!"

She snapped up the receiver and rushed upstairs to put on her flowered lavender voile and hat to match.

Meantime, Henry Maus, a handsome, burly youth, with an unintelligent and rather brutal countenance, turned from the telephone to instruct his sister. His head was in a whirl at the prospect of escorting to the circus such "a winner" as Irene Laub. That he was going at the expense of John Wimmer, his successful rival for Irene's hand, and that Irene was evidently playing one of her "nasty tricks" on her patient, long-suffering lover, added much, in Henry's estimation, to the zest of the adventure.

"Say! Minnie!" he called to his sister, beginning at once to unlace his shoes to expedite the change into his "Sunday clothes." "Come on here oncet! Hurry up!"

A young girl, wearing the plain black garb of the New Mennonites, came from the kitchen porch to the doorway. She was a slightly built, fine-featured

maiden, whose Madonna-like loveliness defeated the purpose of her puritanic garb, which really rather enhanced than marred her beauty. She was in every respect a contrast to Irene Laub. Her colouring was not rich and varied, but toned to the daintiest delicacy; her figure was not robust and voluptuous, but slender and graceful; her countenance was not scornful and peevish, but gentle and thoughtful. To the crude taste of the young Pennsylvania Dutch beaus of Hessville, Minnie Maus's ethereal beauty seemed colourless; and her quiet gentleness, as contrasted with the boisterous jollity of most of the Hessville girls, seemed spiritless. She did not appeal to them. It was fortunate, therefore, that they, in their turn, did not, for the most part, appeal to her.

To the discerning, however, Minnie would not have appeared either colourless or spiritless. There was a look in her eyes as of a smouldering fire; an expression about her soft lips of quiet resolution.

"Say, listen here, Minnie," her brother admonished her authoritatively, "John Wimmer's comin' up here in his buggy to fetch you two circus tickets and two such *re*-served seats fur you and Pop. Now——"

"Oh!" she interrupted breathlessly, a faint colour coming into her pale cheeks, "John's coming here himself—now?"

"You're not to turn down them circus tickets—do you hear?"

"Do you mean," she asked incredulously, "that *you'll* take father to the circus? He'll like awful well to go!"

Henry laughed her to scorn. "I'm likely to go along to a circus with Pop yet—ain't? Aw, give another guess! Don't be so dumb! Just you mind what I tell you, Minnie, and take them tickets off of John Wimmer when he offers 'em to you. And don't leave on to him that I sayed nothing to you about 'em. Do you hear?"

"I can't use them myself, you know."

"Huh! I bet if John Wimmer ast you to go along with *him* anywheres—to a circus or to hell itself—no damned religion would hold you back! Och, I seen this good while back a'ready how you are gone on that great big boob that's so dippy over Irene Laub he leaves her treat him like an old shoe! No use *your* thinkin' about him! Now mind what-I'm tellin' you—take them tickets when he offers 'em, or it'll be the worse *fur* you!"

With which brotherly admonition, Henry rushed upstairs in his stocking feet to finish a hasty toilet, while Minnie, rather bewildered, her heart beating fast, went to the front of the house to wait for John Wimmer's buggy.

Hessville was a prosperous village and almost the only house in it that manifested signs of poverty was this of the Maus family. But while the little frame building needed paint and repairs; while the furniture was old and shabby and the carpets worn and

patched, there was, nevertheless, a homelikeness, an inviting coziness about the place; Minnie knew how to make the best of her poverty.

She held the position of assistant teacher in the village school under John Wimmer, Principal, and she was the main support of her aging and sickly father and of her idle and ruffianly brother Henry.

When John's buggy presently drew up to the house and Minnie went out to the curb to meet it, the young schoolmaster was pleasantly conscious, as the girl came toward him, of the peculiar grace of her movements. In their daily association at school, John, being an exception among his fellow-villagers, was always alive to the atmosphere of refinement, of spirituality, that Minnie's presence seemed to bear. It was hard sometimes to believe that she and "Hen" were brother and sister and that she was the daughter of that old fraud, Doc Maus. John did not know it, but his close partnership, in work, with Minnie was making him feel and see occasionally, even through the blinding light of love, that Irene was, now and then, raw and crude.

"I got two tickets for the circus, Minnie, and four trolley tickets to and from town that I ain't using. Do you want to take your father?"

"You are kind, John, but you know I can't go to a circus," she said, indicating her garb. "And father couldn't take the trip alone. Thank you just the same. But if you'd——" she began, but stopped, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," replied John. "It's a pity you don't favour pleasure-seeking a little, Minnie. It wouldn't do you any harm."

"Our Mennonite preacher said last Sunday," said Minnie wistfully, "how the souls in hell regret the sins they committed on earth; but I thought to myself that maybe when I'm dead, I'll be regretting the *pleasures* I missed on earth!"

There was a troubled look in the dark eyes that she raised to John's; and he thought how pretty and innocent she was.

"Ain't I awful?" she appealed to him.

"Awful ain't the word for it! You make warm chills go over me!" smiled John.

"If only there wasn't any hell," said Minnie pensively, "I'd like to go pleasure-seeking, too, like other ones."

"To really be good, Minnie," returned John thoughtfully, "you got to turn your back on heaven and hell and be good because you *like* it. It oughtn't to make anything *to* you if there's a hell or if there ain't."

She considered this earnestly. "Now, John, I see a thought in that—it's love, not fear, that must fill the heart. Ain't?"

"Sure. I wouldn't be surprised if the kingdom of heaven wasn't any place *but* in the heart."

"I know you're such an *Un*-believer, John."

"I don't call that being an Unbeliever. Well," he added, picking up the reins, "I'm sorry I got to be

moving on, for I like holding conversations on deep subjects like them—it's enjoyable. And you're the only person I can hold 'em with. I can't think of myself conwersing on such subjects with Irene," he smiled a little sadly. "She'd think it was awful dry. Say, Minnie, do you know any one I could give these tickets to? I hate for 'em to be wasted."

"It would be a pity for 'em to be wasted," she admitted. "I guess mebby you wouldn't want to give 'em to—to Henny?"

"No, I don't know as I would care to give 'em to Hen."

He noted the look of anxiety, almost of fear, in her expressive eyes. "Has Hen been devillin' you to give him money for circus tickets?" he demanded.

She nodded dumbly

"That lazy hulk! You know, Minnie, I don't favour corporal punishment and don't use it in school—but your brother Hen is an exception to my theory. He needs to be trounced good! And I'd like to be the one to give it to him! Maybe some day I might get warmed up to it yet! Yes, anyhow!"

He picked up his reins to start away, but the open distress and apprehension in her face arrested him.

"If my letting the tickets here will save *you* anything, Minnie——?"

"Oh, it would, John! Hen would be furious if——" She stopped short in some confusion.

"Furious if you don't give him money for a circus ticket?"

"He was nagging at me all morning for the money."

"Well, then, to save *you* trouble, Minnie, I'll let one of these tickets. You can tell Hen it's for your sake, not for his, that I'm letting it."

"But—but—oh, John, don't think me greedy and unthankful, but if you would let both your tickets——"

"Hen wouldn't take your father along—don't you think it, Minnie!"

"I know he wouldn't. But——"

"He wants to take a girl, does he? Is he travellin' with a girl now?"

"No, he ain't. But I know he wants two tickets."

"And don't you know who it is he wants to take along?"

"I ain't sure," she truthfully answered, for such a treacherous trick as that which Irene was trying to play upon John would have been inconceivable to Minnie.

"Oh, well, here, take 'em," said John, handing her both the circus tickets and the trolley tickets. "If it gives you a little peace I guess it's a good use to put the tickets to."

"I'm *wery* much obliged, John."

"That's all right. Good-bye, Minnie."

"Did you turn them tickets down?" Hen greeted her threateningly, coming downstairs in festive apparel just as she returned to the kitchen.

Minnie handed them to him. "Here they are."

"It's good for you that you got 'em. I'd certainly o' made it hot fur you if you hadn't of!"

Minnie turned away and left the room. Henry dashed out the back door to take a short cut through orchards and vegetable gardens to Laub's General Store.

Meantime, John drove quickly back through the village to get Irene for "a buggy ride."

As he drew up before the General Store he was sure he saw the delectable lavender voile flutter past an upstairs window; and his heart fluttered responsively. But when he knocked at the front door no one came to open it. He repeated his knock in vain. Then he went into the store. Mr. Laub, Irene's father, was sound asleep on some cracker boxes. John did not wake him. He was apt to be more considerate of other people than of himself. Stepping softly through the store he went on out to the kitchen. It was empty and darkened. Mrs. Laub and her sister who lived with her had gone to the circus.

John went to the foot of the stairs and called, "Irene!" several times. There was no response.

He stood still and thought—a slow red creeping up into his face, a hurt look in his eyes and about his fine mouth. "This is goin' a little too far, I guess!" he reflected.

Not even Irene dared go too far with John Wimmer. Like most men who are slow to anger, his passions when roused were not mild. However, he had not yet reached the end of his patience.

Slowly and thoughtfully he went out of the house and got into his buggy. As he mechanically picked up the reins the horse started off, but he was too abstracted to heed where he went.

He had not the least idea how a man ought to deal with such whimsical, impossible behaviour as Irene's. She had promised to marry him; he loved her with a passion that awed him; she possessed him body and soul; he breathed and lived every moment of the day for her. What could he do when she acted like this? A man was so helpless when a woman played the tyrant—she had him at such a disadvantage, seeing he couldn't "use her rough" as he would use a man who played fast and loose with him. At the same time he couldn't let a woman make "a darned fool" of him.

He was roused from his reverie by the clangour of the approaching trolley car bound for the city. Tightening his limp hold on the reins, he turned the horse aside to let the car go by, and as it passed him he looked up—to see facing him on the front seat Henry Maus and Irene Laub. Irene tossed her head in mingled defiance and embarrassment. But Henry waved his best straw hat and shouted, "Beat you to it this time, Gran'pop!"

John drove home blindly to his father's farm, a half mile outside the village. His horse was sweating when he unhitched him. He himself, as he made his way from the barn to the house, was breathing hard and deep.

He stopped outside the kitchen door, hesitating to go in. His face must surely betray to his mother and sisters the turmoil of his mind!

Turning away, he walked across the back yard to the slanting cellar door and sat down with a bump.

For a long time—motionless, white, stricken, his eyes on the ground—he sat there, one fact only emerging clear from the confusion and anguish of his emotions. Whatever the cause of Irene's behaviour—whether it was that she was the over-indulged and spoiled only child of her elderly parents; or whether she was what "females" called "nervous"; or whether she was just naturally perverse and inconsiderate—one thing was certain, *she needed discipline.*

Thus far in their courtship he had never crossed her; had yielded to all her most unreasonable notions, indulged her most extravagant demands or requests; had never reproved or resented her perversities and unkindnesses; had been humbly grateful for her gentler moods and had richly rewarded the least of her favours. He had, in short, let her lead him by the nose, and he saw, to-day, that he had let himself be led quite too far.

"She's too sure of me. I've made myself too cheap. A girl don't walue what's so cheap."

It had been a diplomatic blunder on Irene's part to have let John discover that she was leading him a walk and a dance for her own amusement. Not even his great passion for her would let him knowingly

consent to be made a fool of. Not so much for his own self-respect as to save the soul of his beloved would he put an end to it.

He did not dream of holding Minnie Maus responsible for what had happened. She, too, had been duped.

John was a thoughtful fellow and in his own crude way had forged out a good many theories about life and people. One of these theories, culled from his observation of the domestic tyrannies of many of the Pennsylvania Dutch homes of Hessville, was that the worst sort of a mate a man could have was one who, by too much submission, fostered her husband's natural selfishness and brutality. And now he saw to-day that this theory was applicable both ways.

"A poor husband I'd make if I encouraged Irene to act up like this! A poor mother she'd be for our children, leaving herself behave so flighty and unreasonable! It's got to stop!"

The problem that he pondered during the long hours of that September afternoon, sitting as still as a carved image on the cellar door, was how to bring home to Irene that she did not own him body and soul; that if she wanted to hold him she must be fair and square with him. How was he to go about it?

But it was his heart, not his head, that finally, after long cogitation, showed him the way. The suffocating rage, the scorching pain he suffered in the thought of Henry Maus at Irene's side in *his* place this afternoon, while he sat here alone on the cellar

door in the back yard, revealed to him that jealousy was a factor in life more potent than he had hitherto suspected.

"I got to make her jealous. I'll travel with another party for a while and make Irene uneasy."

The only available "other party" he could think of was his young assistant at the school, Minnie Maus.

"That's what I'll do—I'll travel with Minnie Maus for a couple weeks!"

So absorbed was he in the consideration of his own deep misery that he quite overlooked Minnie's part in the farce he meant to play—the farce that was to win Irene to him forever by exciting her fear of losing him. John would never have willingly hurt a fellow human being, least of all a young girl whom he respected and liked as he did Minnie Maus. But today he was blind and deaf to everything in the universe save his burning jealousy and passion.

"I'll start right in to-morrow! Instead of sitting up with Irene Sunday night, I'll go take Minnie buggy riding right past Irene's front step!"

He knew that to keep away from Irene when every drop of blood in his body cried out for her; to act deliberately in a way to cause his beloved such hours of suffering as he was now suffering; to stick to his plot with Spartan courage until he had safely brought it to a successful culmination—would require all the resolution that he could command.

But whatever were John Wimmer's shortcomings, a lack of resolution was not one of them.

CHAPTER II

THE day following the circus was Sunday, the great courting day among the villagers, on which John and Irene always spent the afternoon and evening together—driving, walking, attending "meeting," or just sitting around "keeping company."

Irene, knowing she had treated her lover very shabbily, anticipated eagerly the fun of "making up" when he came to see her to-day. Having teased and fooled him to her heart's content, she was ready now to be generously gracious to him. She dressed herself to look her prettiest, feeling perfect confidence in the power of her beauty to dispel any soreness he might feel at the flagrant and audacious disloyalty of which she had been guilty in having used *his* tickets to go to the circus with another "admarer." Although she had never before tried John quite so far as this, she did not for a moment fear that he would not forgive her this time as he always had done in the past.

So, when the afternoon went by and he did not come, she was very much surprised and a little bit worried.

"It'd serve him right if I wasn't home when he

does come round this evening! I have a good notion to just *go* off somewheres after supper!"

But she did not "go off somewheres." She prinked up afresh and sat out on the front step to watch for John's buggy coming up the street.

"He'll have to *plague* me to go buggy-ridin' along now!—after keepin' me settin' round all afternoon waitin' fur him!"

Never before had he tried to "spite her back" like this! It sounded a note of warning to her that his patience had its limits.

It would have been inconceivable to her that, far from trying to "spite" her, he was endeavouring to discipline her for her own good.

Irene could not, guilty though she felt, regret very deeply what she had done, for she had had a grand time at the circus with Hen Maus. Hen was lots better company than sober old John. Hen was such "a jolly fellah," such "a cut-up"! They had been boisterously hilarious all the afternoon; she had never laughed so much in all her life.

"To be sure Hen's awful common beside John," she reflected as, sitting on the porch with eyes strained for the first sight of John's buggy coming up the street, she recalled some passages of her good time of the day before. "Hen ain't got the refined manners at him that John's got, nor the grand education neither. But refined manners and a Normal School education can certainly make a fellah awful slow!" she pouted, recalling resentfully John's grave silence

whenever vulgar jokes were "cracked" or coarse allusions made in his presence.

She was aware, with secret shame, of the fact that she was much more at home with Hen than with her betrothed.

"It's a pity Hen ain't as good-fixed as what John is!"

Not only was Hen poor, but he was the son of a disgraceful old fake Doc, a "healer" who powwowed the sick; and though there was scarcely a family in Hessville or in the surrounding township that did not, in emergency, when regular doctors failed, experiment with the supernatural help which "Doctor" Maus claimed the power to dispense, yet they held him, quite illogically, in contempt. Not because he was a quack, but because he charged them nothing, believing himself empowered and appointed of God to heal; and though it was understood that his patients should reward him with a gift, as little or as much as they chose, nothing at all if that suited them better, yet one could not, of course, respect a man who held his wares as cheap as that. Irene knew that to take up with the penniless son of a man like Doc Maus—she who was more popular with "the fellahs" than any other girl in Hessville—would be to lower herself. John, on the other hand, being the son of a rich farmer, a graduate of Kutztown Normal, and the village teacher getting $75 a month clear, was one of the best matches in the whole township. Irene was very much aware of all the worldly advantages of her engagement.

She had had time to become a bit apprehensive before she saw, at last, her lover's buggy approaching. It had seemed unbelievable that he would remain away from her not only all day but again this evening. The moment she heard the clatter of the horse's hoofs she knew how foolish had been her momentary fear that he was actually letting the whole of Sunday pass without coming to "sit up" with her.

"He couldn't near act like that!" she now confidently smiled to herself. "That *would* be going some!"

What, then, was her surprise when, as the buggy drew near, she saw that John was not alone! Someone was at his side; a black-bonneted "plain" person. Whom was he bringing to see her—and why? He always preferred to be alone with her—why, then, this——

But the buggy was not slowing up at her door! The person at his side was, she could see now, his school assistant, Minnie Maus! They were smiling into each other's eyes as they drove right straight past the house—John scarcely lifting his eyes from Minnie's radiant face as he raised his hat to his betrothed! Irene had always been very conceited over the fact that her lover was the only man in Hessville who raised his hat to women.

"Well, of all the nerve!" she gasped, bewildered to the point of idiocy. "Well, John Wimmer, if you ain't! Well, this *is* going some!"

The awful possibility that she had lost him altogether through her ruthless behaviour made her heart sink for an instant. But she quickly realized how groundless was such a doubt. She knew too well how great was his passion for her. It could not be killed all in an hour by *any*thing she might do. He was only "paying her back," trying to make her jealous. As if she could be jealous of such as Minnie Maus, even if Minnie *was* a school teacher! Oh, to be sure, Minnie was "no bad looker." But how could she, Irene Laub, be jealous of a Mennonite, a "plain" person?

"John certainly would look higher'n a Mennonite, even if he was in love with one, which he ain't! He's nutty about me and no one else! He'd anyhow look higher'n Minnie Maus, same as I'd look higher'n Hen. Och, you ain't foolin me any, John Wimmer!"

And yet, the incredible fact that he had "up and took" Minnie Maus instead of her, out "on his buggy," was so astounding that she could only stare at it stupidly, quite unable to concentrate her attention upon a plan for "getting back at him."

Some other instances of the resolution of which John was capable began to recur to her—causing her an uneasiness she had never before experienced in her relations with him. There was that time when he had "cheeked" his tyrannical father—Irene had heard the story often from one of John's admiring sisters. He had been only seventeen years old at that time, but had already become bigger and

stronger, physically and mentally, than his father was. Mr. Wimmer had always overworked his children, stinted them, allowed them no pleasures or recreations, punished them harshly for every trifling fault and, in short, had done everything in his power to make them worthless cowards, hypocrites, and sneaks. But in the case of his first-born child and only son, his efforts to achieve this result had been vain. Though John's childhood had been gruesome, he had not been cowed; he had bided his time patiently, quietly, with Spartan endurance, his apparent submission goading his father, sometimes, to actual cruelty in his contempt for the poor-spirited boy. John had waited until he could be quite sure of himself. And at last one day, when his favourite young sister was about to be chastised, he revealed himself. Without any flurry or excitement, the young Hercules had coolly lifted his father off his feet and with a grip of iron had held him high in air until he had extracted from him a promise to "leave the girl be."

Then John had laid down the law to him: no more beatings; at least a village school education for all of them; no field or barn work for his mother and sisters—"You can well afford to hire all that——"

His father had threatened to put him out of the house; to disinherit him. But John, paying no attention to his threats, had without any apparent effort, become, from that day, the head and master of the house; at least the master of his father; he had

never shown any inclination to dominate his mother and sisters. Like all bullies, his father feared the man or boy who was not afraid of him. He submitted to his son's supremacy abjectly.

Irene thought of other instances of John's determination. When, upon his graduation from "Kutztown Normal," he had been elected principal of the Hessville school, he had given it out, on his first day as master, that he was "opposed to corporal punishment." The school board had been alarmed, feeling sure that he could never earn his salary without using his muscular arms as well as his book-learning. That would be much too lazy a way to teach school. The Board did not propose to pay $75 a month and not get their money's worth.

But strange to say, John had never had the least trouble in governing his school without the rod. He treated his pupils "so white" (so they said) that they would have been ashamed to "bother" him. He had even been able to manage that "dumb thing," Emmy Fetterhoff, a great girl of sixteen who, for no apparent reason, would get "stubborn spells," become as balky as a mule, refuse to speak or move, responding neither to scoldings nor beatings. Through all her school years her teachers had tried in vain to beat this obstinacy out of her. She had never once in her life given in under punishment no matter how severe it was; she had yielded only when she was "good and ready." Now Emmy's "spells" had always afforded an exciting diversion from the dull

routine of lessons. With the advent of each new teacher, the suspense as to whether he or she would succeed in conquering the girl; to what extremes the teacher would go to accomplish this feat and prove his physical efficiency; how he would accept his almost certain defeat—these were deeply interesting uncertainties. Therefore, when John Wimmer made no attempt whatever to conquer her, the school's disappointment was tragic.

"All right, Emmy," he had said to her when one morning she suddenly refused to budge from her seat and come up to her geography class and would not open her lips to answer his inquiry as to why she would not come, "go to it, my child, if you get any fun of it. Enjoy yourself. I guess I can stand it as long as you can. I'm bigger and stronger than you are."

After that he had never noticed her; just let her sit—all day long. Her spells usually lasted a week or more. She recovered from this one in a day and a half. And she never tried it out on John again. The caprice had lost its zest.

John's avowed faith in the superior power of love, rather than of fear and punishment, to overcome evil, was looked upon in Hessville as the foolish notion of one whom "too much learning" (a graduate of Kutztown Normal, be it noted) had rather unbalanced. He seemed to employ his strong will to govern himself rather than others—which was clearly eccentric.

But occasionally, when he met with a case in which his theory failed to work out, he had the common sense to compromise with his theory and deal with the exception very forcefully, as the bully of his school, Jake Gumpf, had learned to his cost when he had attempted to prove the shallowness of the teacher's views.

"Jake sure got all that was comin' to him and then some!" the pupils had reported at home.

"So John Wimmer licked him, did he? He might have knowed from the beginning that he'd have to lick Gumpf before he could learn him his books."

"But he didn't lick him!"

"Didn't lick him?—but you sayed he got all that was comin'——"

"Yes, but John Wimmer didn't lick him—he drug him out to the pump and pumped water on him! Jake had to go home to get dry things on and when he come back——"

"I bet he give it to John Wimmer when he come back—ain't? Why, he is near as big as what John is—ain't, he is?"

"Yes, he is. And when he come back with his Sunday clothes on, he went fur John Wimmer like anything—but John he just drug him out to the pump again and pumped him wet all over his Sunday clo'es yet! Golly, but Jake did have mad at John! And John he tol' him, 'Better come with your mackintosh on next time or your Atlantic City

bathing suit!' John sayed. 'I don't like to spoil all your suits fur you,' he sayed."

An occasional exception, however, like the case of Jake Gumpf, had not convinced John that his theory was false.

"Principles are all right to have, but a person mustn't be stubborn about 'em," he had explained his attitude. "I can see how it might be right sometimes to steal, to lie—yes, to kill even. You can't make any rule to fit all cases. If human beings had always acted on this idea instead of holding so hard and fast to *rule*, a lot of suffering would have been saved in the world."

All these things passed through Irene's mind as she sat on her front porch in the September twilight, thinking of John driving up the road with Minnie Maus at his side.

"It seems," thought Irene, "that he manages every one he wants to manage. Well, he'll find out he ain't a-goin' to come over *me* with his funny tricks! If that's his game—to make me have jealous of that little Mennonite—all right! I'll fix *him!* I'll travel with Hen! As long as he runs with Minnie I'll run with Hen—and we'll see who'll give in first! I bet anything it won't be me!"

CHAPTER III

DON'T you know *why* John Wimmer's runnin' with you?" Henry Maus scornfully twitted his sister as he ate greedily of the supper she had cooked on her return from a long, hard day at school. "To make Irene have jealous, that's why! Did you conceit that he was gone on *you?* Huh!"

As Minnie had no vanity as to her personal attractions, she could readily believe her brother's interpretation of John's astonishing rush of attentions to her. But to be with him, to sit at his side, to hold "conwersations" with him on "deep subjects," to hear his voice and look into his eyes—all this was such happiness that, however short-lived it might be and whatever his reasons for coming to her, her starved life seized eagerly upon these crumbs of bliss that fell to her.

Only once before had she had a "gentleman friend." But when her brother Henry had found his easy life of idleness threatened by the possibility of her marrying and ceasing to support him and their father, he had cunningly set himself to the task of breaking off the engagement. He had informed Minnie's very eligible young lover that if he married

Minnie he would have her father on his hands to support.

"Pop he don't earn enough to pay fur his own keep and I ain't workin' to keep him! No old dope fiend fur mine, I can tell you! Pop's a dope fiend yet! Yes, anyhow! And Minnie she'd stick by Pop no matter what he done. He's gettin' *her* in the habit of dopin' a little!"

This latter statement had been an inspiration of the moment and had been no part of Henry's planned propaganda to break off the engagement.

Though the menace of having to support the pseudo-doctor had not daunted Minnie's young man, her brother's statement that she was addicted to drugs had had the desired effect. He had fled from her presence never to return; and Henry had been able to live on in ease and idleness.

Minnie had never learned why her lover had deserted her, though she had always suspected that Henry had had a hand in it. She would have been amazed and shocked to have heard her father called "a dope fiend." The accusation was as untrue of him as of herself.

As she had supposed herself to be in love with her betrothed, she had grieved sorely for a time; but the pressing necessity of her working to stave off want, her days and nights crowded with teaching, housekeeping, mending, washing, and ironing, had given her small chance to indulge her sorrow and disappointment.

During the past winter her association at school

with John Wimmer had obliterated the last scar of that first heart wound—though her adoration of John was, she very well knew, without hope.

Henry had not an instant's fear of John's attentions to his sister. He could not imagine any man's preferring so drab a creature as Minnie to dashing, gorgeous Irene Laub. So he welcomed the little farce that gave him a temporary advantage over his successful rival. The only trouble about it was that keeping company with Irene was expensive. It cost more money than Minnie could possibly spare. Ever since the last time he had, under threats of violence, extracted from her three dollars with which to take Irene to town to a movie and a soda fountain, Minnie had had no money to buy meat and the butcher would not give them credit. Henry did not enjoy vegetarianism.

John found his self-imposed torment in staying away from his beloved not without its compensations in the surprising discovery he made through his attentions to Minnie. He learned for the first time in his life what comradeship can mean, the interchange of ideas with a mind as earnest as his own. It was a novel and a delightful, even an exciting experience to him.

"I never would have thought," he told Minnie at the end of a long evening, "what enjoyment there is in conwersation!"

He and Irene had never, just to say, "conwersed together"; they had sat and looked at each other;

held hands and fondled each other; made talk perfunctorily or disputed foolishly over some triviality. John had never even tried to talk to her of the things he pondered in his heart; of giving her, as he found he could give Minnie, his serious reflections and convictions about life. He was finding it the greatest thing he had ever known, this comradeship with "a kindred mind."

And yet, through it all, there was never a moment when his flesh and his blood did not cry out for Irene; for the fulness and richness of her ripe womanhood; her beauty; the touch of her soft satin skin; the warmth and glow of her whole personality. With all the strength of his manhood he yearned for her.

"Now if only I could talk with Irene like what I can with Minnie, what a wife she'd make me!" he sometimes thought on his homeward drive after an hour with the little Mennonite girl.

It was a significant fact (which, however, escaped his notice) that although he often wished he might improve Irene by giving her Minnie's sympathetic understanding, he never thought of wishing that he could impose Irene's flamboyant beauty upon Minnie's expressive delicacy. He felt too keenly the lovely harmony of Minnie's outward and inner self.

It was because of his lack of personal conceit that it never occurred to him that he might be jeopardizing Minnie's happiness in the wonderful friendship he was enjoying with her. He no more dreamed of her falling in love with him than he thought of falling

in love with her. Supremely contented in her presence though he was, she never kindled a spark in him; and he never suspected that she herself was on fire.

They talked one evening about her father as they strolled together through a country lane.

"You ain't so dumb, I'm sure, as to believe he *can* heal sickness, are you, Minnie?"

"I believe that some of the sick people that come to him heal themselves by their faith in him."

"That might be," John granted.

"It *seems* so much as if he did cure folks that I used to believe he did—till here one day a woman came to have her boy's warts taken off by father's powwow words. Well, father wasn't home. But the next week the warts began to disappear anyhow. Now if father had been home, you see, we'd all have thought the powwow words had done it."

"Of course—when it was merely co-in-*ci*-dence," agreed John.

"Yes," said Minnie brightly, "that's the thing it was—what you said. So after that I noticed it was nearly always—co—that—or else mind cure. But father thinks he's got power from God."

"Here the other week," said John, "my father went to him to ask him about his cows that used to give $100 worth of milk a month and now give only $40 worth. And your father said to be sure he could fix that all right—and he took and wrote on a piece of paper, *Jesus Christ the same yesterday, to-day and*

forever, and put the paper under the barn door-sill, that the cows walk over. Funny thing, Minnie, those cows are giving more milk! They are for sure! *I* don't understand it!"

"It can't be mind cure," smiled Minnie.

"Then it comes under our old friend co-in-*ci*-dence; ain't?"

"Yes, I guess."

"And I guess a good many cures of the regular doctors could come under that head, too—co-in-*ci*-dence!"

"But," said Minnie pensively, "father is not respected like a real doctor is."

"For all he ain't much worse!"

"And," said Minnie wistfully, "he does so believe in himself, John, that I pity him that he ain't respected."

"The reason he ain't respected is because he don't work and earn a living for his family like other men. He oughtn't to live off of you, Minnie. It makes me indignant!"

"It ain't that he's mean, though—like—like Henny. It's just that he's sort of helpless."

"I know. But it's hard on you just the same. You ain't lucky in your folks, Minnie, are you?" said John sympathetically.

"I wouldn't say that about father—I like him pretty well, John. Henny, though, is an awful hardship to me."

"If it wasn't for your father you could shake Hen

easily enough. You could just *let* housekeeping and go to the *ho*tel."

"But what would become of Henny?"

"Would *that* worry you any?"

"Well, not so very much," Minnie doubtfully admitted.

"Hen's got to support himself *some* time. He can't always live on you!"

"I wouldn't so much mind supporting him if he was only good to me."

"I know," said John, his face suddenly flushing red as he recalled the morning that Minnie had come to school with a black bruise on her cheek. "I took notice, too, since I've been going to your house lately, Minnie, how Hen won't ever do a hand's turn for you! Here this evening—to see you chopping wood and him loafing in a hammock, was most too much for me! You better warn Hen that it won't be good for his health to get me *too* hot by things like that!"

Minnie was so unused to sympathy for her trials and wrongs, for her starved and burdened girlhood, that the experience was inexpressibly sweet to her and her face softened and brightened with happiness as John talked.

"Even if your father does live on you, he ought to make Hen get out and work," continued John.

"Father can't, John. He never could control Henny."

"You oughtn't to give Hen any of your money,

Minnie. It's bad enough that you do cook and wash and iron and clean for him!"

"I know I oughtn't to, but——"

"Don't you be one of these poor-spirited females that leaves a male trample on you—you're too good for it!"

Minnie did not reply. She could not explain to John how it was at home. She was afraid to.

She wondered whether some of his animosity toward Henry were not due to jealousy of her brother's attentions, just now, to Irene.

But if in this surmise she was right, John himself was not aware of it. He thought he had quite recovered from the jealous rage he had suffered the day of the circus; he was sure he knew his beloved far too well to have any fears of her throwing herself away on a worthless ruffian like Hen Maus.

What he did not know, however, and would have considered inconceivable, was that Irene, though chaffing frantically at her lover's continued alienation and irritated in her vanity at his open attentions to another girl, nevertheless found Henry attractive—much more so than she found her betrothed.

Inasmuch as John, in all his intercourse with Minnie, never once mentioned Irene's name, Minnie was left in painful doubt as to his feelings and "intentions"—as to whether his visits and their walks, drives, and talks were "for really" or only, as Henry insisted, intended to punish Irene.

Minnie struggled against hoping or believing that

John was in love with her, for that would make it all the harder when he left her and went back to Irene. But even while she tried not to hope for the happiness that seemed to hang so near her reach, she endeavoured at the same time to make some of John's ideals her own. Her brother was the first to feel the effect of this.

"I need some cash—come on and hand it over," Henry gruffly said to her on the morning after John's advice to her not to "be one of those poor-spirited females to leave a male trample on you." "You're too good for it!" John had said. Minnie would never forget that he had said that.

It was Saturday and as there was no school she was doing the family washing on the back porch.

"Will you fill that tub with water for me?" she asked Henry in response to his demand, her lips quivering a little at her own audacity; for Henry resented being asked to do menial jobs and his resentment was apt to take very unpleasant forms.

"Will I which?" he asked incredulously.

"Fill both these tubs for me," repeated Minnie, getting bolder with time. "I get it so ugly in my back carrying water."

"Did you hear what I sayed to you? I want some cash. Go get me some and be darned quick about it!"

"I can't spare you any. The General Store won't give me credit any more till I pay what I owe already. So I got to have ready money, or we go without food."

"You got paid yesterday. You can anyhow spare me a dollar."

"No, Hen, I can't. If you want spending money you'll have to work and earn it."

"I'll show you if you can't!" he said threateningly, lifting his big hand; but she turned a look upon him that made him pause. Ever since that time he had struck her in the face and the school board had notified her that until her face no longer flaunted the disgraceful signs of "a fight," she must stay home from school and pay a substitute, he had been careful to deal out his blows in such a way that they did not react against himself so disastrously as to deprive him of food and drink.

He dropped his lifted hand; but he seized her arms and twisted them viciously.

"Now where's your money at? Tell me!"

"I won't tell you."

He dug his nails into the bared flesh of her arms until she cried out and the tears rose to her eyes.

In response to her cry there appeared in the kitchen doorway the slender, almost emaciated form of "the Doc," a long-haired, long-bearded, fanatical looking old man, with the unseeing eyes of one who lives in dreams and the weak lips and chin of a man of no force of character. His clothes were patched and threadbare and his shoes out at the toes, but he had strangely the look of something he was not—a scholar and a "reduced gentleman."

"Come, come, Henny," he protested anxiously. "Don't be so rough! Don't hurt Minnie!"

"Where have you it put?" repeated Henry, ignoring his father. "Answer up if you don't want some more!"

"I won't tell you and if you——"

But her words ended in a scream as he twisted and pinched her arms again.

"Henny!" cried the "Doctor" piteously. "Leave her be, Henny!"

"Want some more? If you don't, speak out! Where's that money at?"

"Tell him, Minnie!" begged her father. "Better tell him sooner'n get him so spited!"

"He shall not take my money, father!"

"But you know he'll get it off of you in the end, so you may as well give it to him before you get hurt any more."

"Father, won't you help me? Won't you go to the phone and call up John Wimmer and tell him to come here as soon as he otherwise can?" was Minnie's bold and astonishing request.

"What do you want of John Wimmer?" quavered her father.

"He'll protect me from Henry!"

"But, Minnie," protested her father in distress, "I don't want no fightin' round here! It would hurt my practice!"

"His 'practice'!" cried Henry derisively, recovering from his breathless amazement at Minnie's

unwonted spirit. "Get on to his callin' it his 'practice' yet! Whose loss would it be if your old practice did get hurt! Not ourn! *We* don't get no good out of your practice! If you charged big fees fur your damned powwowing, you might call it your 'practice.' Helpin' other ones all the time and leavin' your own family starve! Och, you make me sick!"

"I can't charge money fur doin' the Lord's work, Henny. Jesus Christ never charged no fees and neither kin I."

"Aw, dry up—and stop your interferin' between me and Min! Go on!" he motioned the old man away threateningly.

The Doctor turned away, cowed, and went slowly back into the house.

"Now, look-a-here, Minnie," pursued Henry, "you tell me where you are got that there money or I'll tie you up in the cellar till I find it!"

"You can't find it. I've got it hid too safe."

"Then I'll pinch you till you tell me where it's hid!"

"Then I'll scream for help till the neighbours come in!"

Henry stared at her incredulously. Could this be his meek and lowly sister whom he had always found it so easy to bully?

"Huh! It's John Wimmer's made you so spunky all of a suddint. Ain't it is?"

"Yes. It is."

"A body'd think you'd have a shamed face to put it out how you're gone on another girl's fellah!" Henry taunted her.

"If you want your clothes washed and ironed today, you'd better leave me get to work," was Minnie's reply. "Oh!" she cried in agony as he responded by another pinch and twist that drove the colour from her lips.

"Where's that there money?"

"I better tell you, Henny, that if John Wimmer hears of your hurting me he is going to carry you out to their farm and tie you up in the barn and cowhide you! He says he's going to!"

It was Henry's turn now to turn white to the lips. Hessville had learned to believe that when John Wimmer said he would do a thing, he generally did it.

"Him talkin' about cowhidin' his neighbours yet, when he puts it out that he don't uphold to corp'al punishment!"

"He don't believe in corporal punishment for—human beings. But he says sometimes it's the only thing you *can* do with—with brutes!"

"A pretty Mennonite you are, callin' your own brother a brute!"

"Then don't act as if you were one."

"John Wimmer wouldn't never know what I done to you if you didn't up and tell him—and I guess you wouldn't near do a thing like that there—get him to lick your own brother!"

"When did you ever act like my own brother to me?"

"Look-a-here, now, I had enough of your lip! Whether I acted like a lovin' brother or whether I didn't, you gimme that there money and no more words about it! Come on!"

"No."

Again Henry lifted his hand to strike and again Minnie stopped him with a look.

"If you strike me I'll tell John!"

"Aw, you're kiddin'! *I* ain't afraid you'll tell him. You and your old John Wimmer, you——"

He called her a foul name which brought a crimson tide to her white face.

"Leave go my arms!" she said in an ominously quiet voice—so ominously quiet, indeed, that in sheer bewilderment Henry dropped his hands from her quivering flesh and stared at her open-mouthed.

"Now, then," she said, still speaking very quietly, "if you ever lay your hands on me again, I'll not only tell John—I'll help him tie you up in his barn!"

She turned back to her tubs and went on with her work.

And Henry, feeling himself suddenly confronted by a new and unknown force in this sister of his, the existence of which he had never even suspected, slunk away like a beaten cur. For the first time in his life he had been foiled of his will in his own home.

CHAPTER IV

TO HESSVILLE came, one day, in a limousine and fur coats, the Social Welfare Workers from the city, to uplift the life of the villagers; invading the school house first—"Begin with the Child, working up through the Child to the Heart of the Parent"—and instituting a tooth brush campaign—a prize to be given to the child who most enthusiastically and persistently plied the tooth brush, and who guided his or her benighted parents to the same high plane—"To elevate the Home Standards of the People," explained one of the fur-clad limousine ladies to the schoolmaster.

"'The People'?" repeated John questioningly—he was one of those old-fashioned products of our public schools who believe in our Declaration of Independence, our Emancipation Proclamation—"All men are created free and equal."

"Ain't *you* one of 'the People'?" he searchingly inquired of the smiling, gracious lady who yearned to inject sweetness and light into darkest Hessville—by way of the Tooth Brush.

He gathered from her reply that by "the People" she meant those who did not use tooth brushes. It seemed that the Tooth Brush would inoculate the Child against the germ of Bolshevism.

"To educate the Child in Good Citizenship will remove the menace."

"And good citzenship means using tooth brushes—do I get you?" asked the schoolmaster solemnly.

"It's quite fundamental—the use of the tooth brush," replied the lady firmly.

"All right—if you think. But there's no telling where they may lead to—tooth brushes. Next thing they'll want their hands so manicured to make them good citizens; and daily baths and daily change of clothes and other 'decencies,' as you call them—decencies that will mean they've got to have a lot more time and money than any one in Hesswille's got now. It looks to me," said John, shaking his head, "that tooth brushes will lead straight *to* Bolshevism, not away from it! Better leave tooth brushes be!"

"If I thought that," the lady, looking alarmed, faltered in her high purpose.

But her companion, a vigorous, robust Major-General sort of a woman, answered John.

"Through our Social Welfare Workers, tooth brushes have been firmly established in many homes of the People without, thus far, producing a revolutionary spirit of unrest. You are over-apprehensive, my good man!"

"All right—go to it—if you think it's safe," John yielded them right of way in his schoolroom. "It anyhow gives you city ladies something to put in your time at."

On their second visit, three weeks later, to investigate Hessville's progress toward Good Citizenship, they found the results of their campaign rather discouraging.

"I didn't have no need to buy no tooth brush—Pop had one I could use."

"Mom says it's too much trouble—it's every day all of us hollerin' at oncet, 'Mom, where's the tooth brush at?'"

"My Pop says he has tired of hearin' us scrappin' over whose turn it is to use the tooth brush!"

The domestic tranquillity of Hessville had been threatened by tooth brushes.

The Welfare Workers did not, however, stop at tooth brushes. Observing that the schoolmaster's assistant teacher wore the plain garb of her New Mennonite faith, they became greatly agitated lest the embryo citizens in the Hessville school become religiously corrupted.

They appealed to the school board.

"If you allow a teacher wearing the Mennonite garb to teach your children and subtly insinuate her Mennonite doctrines into the young budding minds of Hessville, how can you consistently forbid a Roman Catholic sister, for instance, to become one of your teachers?"

"You mean such a Romish lady brought up in Poppery?" demanded a school director in consternation.

The result was the passing of the Garb Law. No

one wearing a religious garb could teach in Hessville.

It was a two-fold tragedy to Minnie Maus to lose her place as John Wimmer's assistant. It left her and her family without any income; and it robbed her of the ecstasy of daily association with the schoolmaster.

Henry was the one to feel it most deeply. The Doctor never worried about the wherewithal to live and Minnie was used to doing without things she wanted. But Henry liked good meals, good clothes, and pocket money. He was in despair.

"Why don't you cut it out—them ugly Mennonite clo'es you wear? What good does your darned old religion do you anyhow?" he reasoned with her. "It would be a deal more Christian fur you to keep your good job fur the sake of your fambly!"

"Is your Mennonite faith such a wital matter to you, Minnie," John asked her, "that you can't give up your garb and keep your place in my school? I hate to think of another assistant in your place. I'm so used to you. And I like your ways with the little scholars. I don't know how I'll stand it if I get someone in my school that hollers at the children or wants to administer corporal punishment."

John's phraseology was sometimes pedagogic. Minnie greatly admired his lapses into the stilted speech which was the evidence to her of his superior education.

"I can't give up my faith for lucre, John," she

replied, her white, scared face touching his sympathies.

"Then what will you do, Minnie?"

"I'll try sewing. I'm a pretty good seamster. But—but—I'll miss seeing you every day!" she said brokenly.

"You're like a dear little sister to me!" he returned kindly. "I certainly will miss you at school, Minnie!"

It was after the loss of Minnie's position that Doctor Maus's unprofitable patients were, more than ever, an irritation to Henry. Whenever he encountered them about his home he treated them with brutal incivility. But this did not, unfortunately, move them to give more generous fees for the healer's services; it only served, in most cases, to drive them away in high indignation.

There was the case of the girl seventeen years old, weighing two hundred pounds, bearing the Christian name of "Birdie," whose grandfather brought her from Fokendauqua, twenty miles distant, to ask the doctor whether fat could be reduced in answer to prayer. Henry, passing through "the front room" during his father's interview with Miss Birdie Medenwald and her grandfather, spoke in rudely.

"I'll tell you how you kin reduce—give my pop what you spend on feedin' your face to stuff your stom-meek! That's the best purscription fur you, Side-Show!"

"I'm sorry to say," the doctor sorrowfully com-

mented as his son flung himself out of the room, "that our Henny's an *Un*-believer. Don't you pay no attention *to* him. We know that all things is possible to him that believeth. If you will pray with me and ast God to reduce your flesh forty-five pounds at a time and *believe that He kin*, it will be did."

"I purfur that method to takin' Anti-Fat," said the grandfather, "fur that there Anti-Fat comes wery high by the quart bottle."

"And prayin' don't cost you nothing," agreed the doctor. "'Salwation's free, that just suits me,' as the poet says."

"That ain't what your son seems to think," Mr. Medenwald remarked suspiciously.

"Yes, well, my son he's a little keen on the penny, that way. Don't pay no attention *to* him."

"So many of my family have died off fur me from takin' that there Anti-Fat," said Mr. Medenwald; "my brother was carried out, my two sisters was carried out, and last month my wife went out, too."

"Yes, I know," replied the doctor sympathetically, "they have died off pretty well—your fambly. Lack of faith in prayer," he diagnosed conclusively.

"We seen a lot of trouble a'ready!" sighed Birdie.

"Och, yes," responded the sympathetic doctor, "and ain't trouble an unpleasant thing!"

"Yes, ain't!" agreed Birdie. "But," she added piously, "if it has to be, then so it has to be. It is as it is."

"Did your parents die off, too, Birdie?" the doctor inquired conversationally.

"Yes, my parents don't none of them live. So I housekeep fur Gran'pop."

"Then you ain't married?"

"No, I got my right name yet."

"Now, will you tell me," pursued the doctor, taking from his breast-pocket a professional looking tablet and a pencil, "what is your initial?"

"I ain't got none," responded Birdie.

"Ain't you got no Christian name?"

"Yes. Birdie."

"B," repeated the doctor, writing it down.

"Didn't you know what your initial meant, Birdie?" asked her grandfather reproachfully.

"Was your ancestry so fleshy, too, like yous all?" inquired the doctor to cover Birdie's ignorance.

"Whether my ancestry was fleshy?" repeated Birdie. "Och, I don't know right. They never bothered me any—my ancestry."

"They was from Out," explained her grandfather with a backward twirl of his thumb to indicate Europe—usually referred to by the Pennsylvania Dutch as "Out."

"Don't yous have sich a fambly history traced?" inquired the doctor of Mr. Medenwald.

"I believe there was one traced, prior to my great grandparents' ad*went* to America. But that I can't relate you. If Missus had stayed living she could better relate you that—about our ancestry. I

did hear a'ready that three Medenwald come over from Out in 1725. Not so, Birdie?" he appealed to his granddaughter.

"You can't prove it by me, Gran'pop."

"Och, well," the doctor reassured them, "it makes nothing—your ancestry. Faith in God is what makes. That's what will reduce your fleshiness, Birdie."

"Birdie she's got it so in her nerves," said Mr. Medenwald. "Her nerves is wonderful! And I had afraid to buy her any of that there Anti-Fat; so I sayed, 'We'll try Doc Maus oncet—it's cheaper,' I sayed."

"And safer," added the doctor.

"And thinks I to myself," continued Mr. Medenwald, "if the Doc kin pray off Birdie's fat oncet, I'll leave him have a try at my eyes. My eyes ain't so good this while back; and I'm only seventy-four goin' on seventy-five. My Missus she had so young glasses, too. Her and me we was almost alike old—both seventy-four. This right eye is darker'n what this here left eye is. You're so cloudy, Doc, through this here right eye, I can't har'ly see you."

"Christ kin restore sight to-day the same as in the bygone ancient times in the past when He was on earth," the doctor affirmed.

"Yes, I heerd a'ready, Doc, you made wonderful cures."

"Not me, but Christ through me."

"I heerd you helped simple Sally Diffendeffer so good—her that wasn't quite sharp. I heerd you prayed her near as sensible as other ones."

"Yes—yes—prais-ed be God!" exclaimed the doctor fervently.

"And now that we are got our Ford it is wery convenient fur us to come over here," added Mr. Medenwald.

"Yes," nodded the doctor, "and I always think when it's more convenient it's so much handier."

"Yes, ain't!" Birdie heartily assented.

"It's twenty mile from Hessville to Fokendauqua and we made it in an hour and a half," said Mr. Medenwald boastfully, "with our Ford."

"Whew!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Yes, ain't!" cried Mr. Medenwald.

"What's the population, now, of Fokendauqua?" inquired the doctor sociably.

"It ain't got none," said Mr. Medenwald.

"It must be a lonesome place," said the doctor thoughtfully.

"Yes, I do often have lonesome," Birdie complained. "And I guess that makes something, too, at the fat; ain't?"

"Prayer with faith can remove mountains," returned the doctor encouragingly. "What do you eat mostly, Birdie?"

"Och, I eat most anything."

"Fried sauer-kraut, mebby, sometimes?"

"Whether I eat fried sauer-kraut? Well, I kin eat it,

but I never get hungry fur it. I have preference to fried pumpkin."

"She favours potatoes, too. She's wery partial to smashed potatoes with butter and milk at," said her grandfather. "But our potato crop this year give so many potato bugs!"

"Yes—there ain't no race suicide among potato bugs—ain't?" smiled the doctor.

"Well, I guess anyhow not!" cried Mr. Medenwald with a loud laugh. "Some joker you are, Doc, ain't?"

"Och, yes, I'm always crackin' jokes. Why, I even crack the Bible in jokes yet to my patients! It makes an *in*-delible impression!"

"Yes, I guess! Well, now, Doc," Mr. Medenwald concluded, rising, "I got to git back home till before dark a'ready, so I guess we better git busy at the prayin'. Does it take long—the prayin'?"

"No—I'll make it a short and snappy prayer," said the doctor obligingly. "You must remember now, Birdie, that God will help you get rid of your fat only if you believe that He ain't stingy."

"I know He ain't been stingy to me about givin' me flesh a-plenty," said Birdie, her tone not noticeably grateful for God's generosity in this respect.

"Another thing," added the doctor, "if at first you seem to be taking on more flesh—three or four pounds or so—you kin know it's only a trick of Satan to weaken your faith. You persewere in prayer and faith and you'll git a wery neat figger till a little while a'ready."

"Must we come often over, or kin we do the prayin' at home?" asked the grandfather.

"If it don't suit you always to come, leave Birdie send me her undershirt over and I magnetize that undershirt in the name of the Lord Jesus and then I send it back to her and she puts it on and her flesh reduces."

"But I like the ride over," said Birdie rebelliously. "Our Ford autymobile makes so quick—twenty mile in a hour and a half yet! Yi, yi, but she runs! Yes, I like to come. Fokendauqua is so lonesome, still, and so slow. It has more lively here in Hesswille."

"Does your son often come round sassin' your patients like what he done to-day?" asked Mr. Medenwald warily.

"Sometimes he comes often," the doctor sadly admitted.

"Then, Birdie, you better send your undershirt over and try what it will make."

"Look-a-here, yous!" Henry suddenly burst into the room from the kitchen where he had been eavesdropping, "if yous want this here heavyweight to git thin, yous'll *pay* fur it!—or she'll stay fat! I make you a bargain—fur every ten pound she reduces, the Doc gits a dollar. Ten cents a pound. And if you don't pay up, the ten pounds is prayed back onto her agin."

"No, Henny, no," gently protested his father, "you can't drive bargains with God. If them that

I help chooses to help me a little, all right. But I make no bargain."

"You shut up, I'm managin' this here!" growled Henry angrily. "If you'd leave me go I'd make *money* fur you out of your darned healin'! But no, you'd sooner see us all starve!"

"It's awful honourable to be poor, Henny—though I admit it's certainly onconwenient. But I can't consent to sell God's power."

Henry turned upon the Medenwalds. "If yous ain't willin' to pay us what you'd pay a real doctor, then yous keep off of here!—or I'll smash your tin Lizzie fur you!"

Of course that was the last the Maus household saw of the fat girl.

Another case that greatly excited Henry's ire was that of the man who came to the doctor to be cured of "Barber's Itch." When after four days of agonized prayer the "Itch" grew steadily worse, the man became discouraged; but not so Doctor Maus.

"This is Satan's work, your gettin' worse. It seems to make him wery angry that you trust in God to heal you. But you persewere and Jesus will give you the wictory."

After a few days more when, naturally and inevitably, the trouble began to disappear, the patient's profuse thanks and voluble praise of the doctor's occult powers added fuel to the flame of Henry's anger.

"Why don't you prove it that you're thankful and

that you think pop's prayin' done it—took your damned Itch off? Prove it! You keep sayin' and talkin' and it ain't nothing to it."

"The proof is here in my body, praised be Gawd!" exclaimed the grateful patient fervently.

But under threat of "a licking" Henry held him up for a dollar, which the patient paid very grudgingly and indignantly. Needless to say the dollar was pocketed by Henry, not by his father.

The bald-headed man, eighty years of age, whose hair was made to grow through the power of prayer—really did grow a little, for some reason—was another victim of Henry's greed. The aged bald one had to pay as much as a bottle of Hair Restorer would have cost.

Then there was the stylish woman from the city who, having heard of the doctor's cures, came all the way out to Hessville for treatment.

"But leave me warn you right now before we begin," she said as soon as she found herself alone with the doctor, shaking her finger at him playfully, "don't you try to get fresh with me, old man! There's them that wants to say you get awful fresh with your lady patients. But leave me tell you I'm a married woman and won't stand fur no foolin'. Do you understand?"

"I understand you to mean," said the doctor with dignity, "that one husband is enough fur you. And wery right and proper that is. You're a perfect lady!"

"Och, Pop, you're dumb!" interrupted Henry, bolting forward from behind the door where he had been listening. "Don't you see she's *askin'* you to flirt with her? That's what she come out here *fur!* Say, you high-flyer," he addressed the woman, "the old man ain't the old devil you take him fur! But if I'll do—heh?"

"Say! Ain't you the fresh guy though!—you young whipper-snapper!" exclaimed the "perfect lady," her tone indignant, but her eyes dancing with enjoyment.

"Meet me up at the Square when you're done prayin'," suggested Henry. "Will you?"

"I ain't promisin' nothing," retorted the lady virtuously.

"I'll be there waitin' fur you; hurry through with your prayin'," said Henry as he left her alone with his father.

"My son's a little too playful, I'm afraid," said the doctor apologetically.

"Och, him!" the lady said with a toss of her head. "Come on—let's get busy."

She proceeded, with the doctor's help, to put in a half hour "at the throne of grace," praying for the speedy and painless removal of a goiter, a wart and a corn.

The news of the activities and interferences of the doctor's son spread far and wide and had the effect of greatly reducing his patronage.

Some few of his grateful patients, however, to-

gether with some of the school directors who felt sorry to have been obliged to discharge Minnie, bestirred themselves to help the family by securing work for Henry—a form of "help" not greatly appreciated by that young man. He was offered the government job of rural postman at $900 a year.

Henry did not want it. Minnie was sure he would not accept it. He did grumble and demur a good deal; but even he could not face the scorn which he knew the village would vent upon him if he "turned down" the very good position which had with much effort been procured for him. Also, the meals at home were becoming very meagre and his clothes were getting too shabby to "keep company" with Irene Laub. This job would actually give him a fighting chance to win Irene permanently from John Wimmer. Then, too, the work would not be very hard. It involved driving the motor mail-truck between Lancaster and Hessville and Henry thought that he would like that in good weather. Of course it would be "fierce" to get up early every morning; and the labour of keeping the truck in order was truly formidable.

Deciding, however, to worry through with as little real work as possible, he accepted the place; and in that self-same hour he borrowed money on his prospects to the amount of his first month's salary and went to town to fit himself out gorgeously in new apparel.

Hessville felt relieved for Minnie and her helpless

father; but these two most concerned did not rejoice. The doctor remained indifferent as to the source of his food and clothing; and to Minnie, the prospect of their being dependent upon Henry seemed rather appalling.

CHAPTER V

JOHN WIMMER kept up his little farce with Minnie longer than he had intended to do, partly because, at the idea of ceasing his visits to her he had such a queer sense of loss; but more particularly because Irene made no sign to him of regret for her behaviour on circus day.

He soon decided, however, that he must bring the thing to an end.

"Even if she is too spunky to apologize, she anyhow knows by this time that I ain't to be trifled with."

At the happy prospect of their reconciliation his heart throbbed, his nerves tingled with an excitement and an ecstasy such as his quiet friendship with Minnie had never afforded him.

He determined to break the ice between himself and his beloved immediately after the County Fair. He had invited Minnie to accompany him to the County Fair to divert her a little from her grief over the loss of her school. He was strangely and quite reprehensibly heedless of the fact that in the etiquette of Hessville taking a girl to the County Fair was tantamount to a proposal of marriage. It cost money to go to the Fair, with its lemonade stands, ice cream cones, side shows and what-not; and it was

understood that a man did not invest money in giving a girl treats unless he expected to get something for it. So absorbed was John in his own devastating passion that it never occurred to him to be apprehensive of the effect, not only upon Minnie, but upon Irene as well, of his taking his little Mennonite friend to the Fair.

The moment Henry learned that his sister was going to the County Fair with John, he determined to invite Irene to go with him. In spite of his recent intimacy with the girl, he would never have dared such a presumption as to ask her to avow thus publicly her friendliness for him had it not been for his recent acquisition of a lucrative job. But this dazzling job, together with the resentment Irene must certainly feel at John's going so far as to invite Minnie to accompany him to the Fair, must surely, Henry felt, insure his success.

Irene, meantime, had been reckoning confidently upon John's "coming round" on the eve of the Fair. She could not imagine his being willing to attend that great social function with any one but herself. That his attentions to Minnie were serious she had never for a moment believed. She had been, however, more and more surprised at his ability to "keep it up"—this "stunt" of his to excite her jealousy.

"Gee, but won't he have to pay for the way he's been treatin' me!" she chafed furiously from time to time. "Mebby he won't have to *work* to get me back again!"

She determined to "fool him good" about the County Fair—she would tell him, when he invited her, that she had "promised another fellah."

"I sure will keep him guessin' a while!" she chuckled in pleasant anticipation.

But of course she would in the end, after having had her fun out of "tormenting" him, give in and go with him.

John, on his side, was entirely unsuspicious of the three-fold effect of his innocent invitation to Minnie —the fuel it added to the flame of Henry Maus's ambitions; the resentful despair it brought to Irene; the mingled bliss and terror with which it flooded the heart of Minnie, who now for the first time felt sure that John meant it "for really."

Of all the cruel difficulties of Minnie's young life that which now confronted her was certainly the worst. It had come to this—would she abandon her Mennonite religion or would she give up the man whom she worshipped far more (she guiltily realized) than she worshipped her austere and rather unlovable Mennonite God, to whom, for the past three years, she had given her undivided allegiance. For she could not marry "out of Meeting" and be retained in its membership. Of course John would not turn Mennonite—not for any girl in all the world. Of that she was sure. The obvious deduction then was that he was confidently expecting her to give up her faith for her love.

"But I think it's queer that he does—for *he* would

never go back on his conscience for the sake of his happiness," she reflected, "and it's a wonder he'd respect me for doing it, strict as he is about right and wrong. Strict with himself anyhow."

She wondered why he had taken the decisive step of asking her to go to the Fair before he had made sure that she would abandon the Mennonites to marry him.

"I wouldn't give up my religion for anything *else* in all the world—not for to keep my school, not for mere money. But I'd give my soul—yes, my immortal soul!—for one kiss from John Wimmer!" she hotly told herself.

After all, Satan, "the Enemy of the soul," had a rather easy victory in his struggle with her. It seemed to Minnie that an eternity in hell was a cheap price to pay for a lifetime with John. The victory for the Enemy was made easier from the doubts in her heart of their being really any wickedness in her yielding to the great love which possessed her. Deep down in her soul was a blind sense that this love was a holy thing; greater and more religious than that cramping, stultifying creed she called "religion."

Her spiritual struggle with her powerful Protagonist finally focussed itself upon the temptation to "dress fancy" for the Fair. John would surely have "a shamed face" to go into the city and about the Fair grounds with her in her plain black frock and hood, he himself being such a "stylish dresser."

She had no money to buy new clothes. There was not the least use in appealing to Henry to give her any money, since he had already spent in advance a full month's pay.

She suddenly remembered, with a thrill of joy that astonished and shocked herself, a certain old leather trunk in the loft under the roof. It contained a robin's egg blue dimity frock which she had made for herself three years ago, just before her conversion had made her "turn plain." She had never worn that frock. It would of course be all out of style now, and as her figure had become taller and fuller it would not fit. But if she worked hard at it she could make it over in time for the Fair. What she should do for a hat she did not know. Maybe she could make a "toque" out of the patches of blue dimity that were left.

"If it will please John to see me dressed all in blue for the Fair, I might as well leave Meeting now as later," she reasoned.

So, on the momentous day of the Fair, when John called in his buggy to take her to town, his amazement, not to say consternation, upon finding the demure, drab little Puritan of his acquaintance so transformed that he scarcely recognized her; clad in radiant blue, her sombre hood replaced by a jaunty "toque" perched upon wavy locks—gave him a shock that nearly knocked him down.

In the moment of realizing that it was actually Minnie who stood before him in the shabby front

room of the dilapidated Maus home, his heart sank to his feet. The Minnie dear to him was the quaint, serious Mennonite, not this gay, smiling, pretty girl who might be anybody at all, a swell department store clerk, a restaurant waitress, or even a city school teacher—it was not his unique little friend and confidante.

His second thought, however, was that now she could return to his school; and at that he smiled back into the dark eyes which, lifted to his, pleaded so eloquently that he should be pleased with her.

"Well, well, Minnie, now you can come to school," he exclaimed as he took her hand. "I'm glad! I can't tell you how glad I am for that!"

"Why, no, John, I can't. The school board can't put the new teacher out now any more," Minnie reminded him.

She took no alarm from the significant suggestion that she might once more work for her living. He *could* mean that she might now earn her wedding clothes and her *aus dire* (the household furnishings which every Pennsylvania Dutch bride contributed to her new home).

"That's so, too," he said, looking disappointed. "I didn't think so far for a minute. But if your fancy clothes don't give me back my little assistant, I'm sorry you don't dress plain. I prefer you the way I've always known you—the way I've learned to like you so well."

Minnie's eyes shone with soft fire. But she did

not answer. Breathlessly she hung upon his words, afraid to stir lest she check the precious sound of his voice that told her how he had "learned to like" her "so well." The most ardent love language could not have said more to her.

"What made you do this, then, Minnie?" he asked, puzzled. "Has your faith got weak?"

"Oh, John, I didn't want you to have ashamed to take me to town in my Mennonite clothes."

"But I wouldn't have! When did you ever know me to care what other ones think or say, Minnie, so long as I know I'm right?"

"Yes, I know how independent you are, John!" she responded, gazing at him with proud admiration. "But maybe I'm not so independent *for* you. I didn't want you to have *cause* to feel ashamed of me."

"But you surely wouldn't near do a thing like that, Minnie!—give up your religion to save me a shamed face for your clothes!"

"Yes—I would!" she half whispered, her delicate face flushing. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for you! I would go—to—hell—for you!" she solemnly affirmed.

The look in her eyes, the heaving of her bosom, the thrill in her tones, suddenly drove every drop of colour from John's face. In a flash he saw what had happened; what he, unwittingly and most unthinkingly, had brought about. Strong man that he was, his knees shook under him. For the strongest thing about him was the great kindness of his heart. He

stood confronted with the fact that he had deliberately gone to work and made a sweet, good girl fall in love with him, when with every drop of his blood, every throb of his brain and heart, he loved another woman. It was all his fault, Minnie had never crooked a finger to win him. She had never even uttered one word of criticism against Irene, a thing almost no other girl in her place would have refrained from doing. She loved him! Never had he thought of such a possibility! How could he have been so heedless, so thoughtless, so self-absorbed, so brutally selfish! Why, oh why, had he not foreseen the chance of a thing like this happening?

The look of adoration, of perfect faith, in Minnie's eyes upraised to his, smote him like a lash. That she would give up her religion for him!—when never for an instant had she wavered in her loyalty to her creed to keep the work she loved in his school and to save her own livelihood!

"Yes, John," he heard, through the tumult in his brain, her soft voice speaking, "that is just the way I feel!"

The next thing he knew (he never understood just how it had come about) the pathetic little homemade blue toque was resting against his coat and she was clinging to him, wildly, passionately! "Oh, John, it can't be displeasing to God—such a wonderful thing as our love! Not if God is good! For our love *is* good and great—so much greater than anything I ever found in my religion! I have done what you

once told me everyone ought to do—I have let my heart speak to me and teach me and I have 'followed it fearlessly,' no matter where it would lead me to. It leads me here—into your arms, John!"

It was in such a moment as this that he, in his agony, thought how blessed would be such words as these spoken by the girl he loved!—though Irene, he knew, was incapable of thinking, feeling, or speaking such words. Yet she was the girl he loved and this girl he did not love.

He began to appear to himself an outrageous villain—for lo! he was still betrothed to Irene!—they had not broken their engagement. Decent people among the Pennsylvania Dutch did not break their plighted troth.

What in the name of all that was honourable, of all that was pitiful, was he to do? Tell Minnie that she had misunderstood his attentions and that he did not love her?—and see the light of her eyes die out, her radiance blighted, her heart (offered to him in such richness and profusion!) flung broken at his feet!

How could he do it? He felt her soft body clinging to him, while his arm rested limply about her waist. He tried to speak, to respond to her burning words. But his voice would not come to him.

If only he could gain time; could get away alone to think it all out; could rush to Irene and have it out with her and ask her to help him! (He could hear her mockery at his awful predicament!)

"Minnie, dear—this came to me so suddenly, I——"

His voice broke and faltered. He did not know what to say to her.

"Yes," she brightly nodded, "I knew how surprised you'd be to find me not dressed plain any more. But I couldn't wait! It's me that has spoken first, John, ain't? I said Yes before you even asked me to, didn't I?" She laughed joyously, her face really beautiful, John thought, in the light of her great happiness. "Until you inwited me to go to the Fair, I wasn't sure you meant it for really—Henny always said you didn't—and I wouldn't leave myself think you did—for all, I couldn't help *knowing* wery often that you must mean it—I couldn't help seeing how congenial we are together—so much more than you and Irene could ever have been—and I knew you must feel it, too—how nice we agree together and how much that goes to make happiness and peace in married life. Oh, John, won't we have happiness together? Think of it!—all our lives together! John! If I knew I was going to die the wery week after we were married and that I'd be damned in hell for all the rest of eternity for giving up Meeting—I'd take that one week with you!"

Her face wore a religious solemnity that made him feel his situation to be perfectly hopeless. A cold terror gripped him lest he yield to his compassion and, committing himself to her irrevocably, forever blot out of his life the sun in the heavens. For that's

what losing Irene would mean to him—eternal darkness.

Suddenly he staggered, put his hand to his head, recovered himself and gently put Minnie from his arms. He was as white as death.

"I'm sick, Minnie—this came to me so unexpected —I got to go home—we can't go to the Fair—I'll see you later—I got such a headache—I'll have to get home—I'll come again as soon as I otherwise can and explain to you—I hope you don't mind not going to the Fair? Are you wery disappointed? I'm sorry! But—I'll make it up to you——"

He never remembered just how he got away—followed out to his buggy by her solicitous tenderness. He had the comfort of realizing, as he drove blindly out to his father's farm, that there had been no sign in her sweet young face of any least suspicion of the truth. She did not know—poor, poor girl!—how tragically mistaken she was in him! She was worried, of course, and sympathetic for his headache —but this slight shadow could not obscure the dazzling brightness of her soul which shone out upon him as he left her, went with him on his frenzied way and stayed with him through all the hours of the day and night that followed.

A telephone inquiry to the General Store as to whether he could talk with Irene brought him the information that she had gone to the Fair with Henry Maus.

And now for the first time John realized the

possibility of something having happened in that quarter, as disastrous as that which had occurred between him and Minnie. What a blind fool he had been to have risked his own happiness and that of two innocent maidens for a purpose which now seemed to him elusive, quixotic, senseless! He saw that Henry Maus as mail carrier with a salary of $900 a year was a rival not to be flouted. He did not, however, feel so helpless, so altogether at a loss, before this side of his difficulty (he could deal with Henry Maus) as before the tragedy of Minnie's great love for him—a love awakened and encouraged only by his own actions and therefore involving him in a responsibility of which he must, perforce, take full account. From this horn of his dilemma he could see no way of escape whatever.

CHAPTER VI

JOHN'S steadfastness in having remained away from Irene ever since her bad treatment of him on circus day had given her so convincing a demonstration of the fact that she could not do as she liked with him, had so transformed her mental image of him, had so inspired in her a respect for him such as had never been called forth by those finer qualities of his which others seemed so highly to esteem, that as Fair day drew near, on which occasion she was confident he would return to her, a most unwonted sense of awe and constraint at the prospect of a renewal of her association with him was her dominant feeling—and this in spite of the fact that she had vowed to herself and to others that when he did "come crawling back" to her, she would "make it hot for him"!

Therefore, when Henry Maus breathlessly came to her with the significant news that John was going to take Minnie to the Fair, it was her pride, not her heart, that suffered. And even her very angry resentment was somewhat modified by the sense of relief in the back of her consciousness.

Yet she burned for vengeance, and when Henry boldly asserted that now *he* intended to be her escort

to the Fair, she brushed aside her doubts as to the propriety of going with such as he and consented at once. She really much preferred Henry's company to John's anyway. She was also not unmindful of the fact that since he had become the mail carrier of the district, some of her girl friends were showing a marked interest in him.

But her enjoyment of the excursion to the Fair was much marred by her inability to put aside the persistent speculation which haunted her as to what was the secret of Minnie's hold upon John. Such a quiet, timid little thing—wherein lay her power?—a power strong enough to keep John Wimmer from *her* side!

During every minute in the Fair grounds her eyes roamed far and wide for a glimpse of the hated pair—oh, how she hated them both! She wanted to see for herself what it was that Minnie Maus possessed which *she* did not have.

"To think of John Wimmer coming to the Fair with a Mennonite!" she said to Henry derisively, as they strolled about among prize cows, chickens, pigs, and other farm products. "A body'd think he'd be too proud!"

Henry was having a hard time repressing his irritation at her inattention toward himself, and her too evident interest in catching a sight of John Wimmer. To be spending his own good money on a girl who showed more interest in another "fellah" was rather hard to bear.

"Wait till I'm married to her oncet!" he fiercely told himself. "She'll pay attention to me *then*, you bet!—or I'll learn her!"

Fortunately for Irene's prospective fate, she was much more capable of protecting herself against the brute tyranny of such as Henry than ever she would be to cope with the moral ascendency of a man like John—as the future was clearly to prove.

"John Wimmer ain't comin' to the Fair with no *Mennonite*," Henry replied to her disparaging reference to his sister.

"Hen Maus!" Irene stopped short in the tan-bark path they were traversing and clutched Henry's thick arm. "Did you up and trick me into comin' here with you by lyin' to me?"

"No, I didn't. And I ain't lyin' to you now. I sayed John Wimmer ain't comin' here with no *Mennonite*. That's what I sayed. And he ain't, neither."

"You sayed he was comin' with your sister Minnie. She's a Mennonite, ain't she?"

"She was yistiddy. To-day she ain't."

"What!" gasped Irene, turning white. "You don't mean to tell me she's fell back?"

"That's what. She's fell back in a lot of ways—she reads books that the Meetin' don't leave the members read—sich novels, mind you—John Wimmer leaves her borrow the loan of 'em off of him; and she goes buggy-ridin' Sundays—you seen that yourself; the Brethren has warned her they'd have her up

fur discipline if she fell back agin—and now here today didn't she tog herself all up in worldly clo'es—a blue frock with sich a blue top-knot that she calls a toque—I tol' her it looked more like a joke. Say, but she looked a swell sight! Gee, but——"

"Look-a-here, Hen Maus!" exclaimed Irene wildly, "does your Minnie think she's a-goin' to *marry* John Wimmer? Don't she *know* he's promised to me a'ready? What does she think she's up to anyhow? I'll learn her something if she don't watch out!"

"John Wimmer won't leave no one hurt a hair of her head! Not even me, her own brother yet! He guards her somepin fierce!"

"And she's gave up the faith and is dressin' fancy!" cried Irene, distraught. "That certainly looks as if she thinks she's *got* him! He must have tol' her he'd be willin' to marry her if she'd give up Meeting! Well, I never!"

"Yes, ain't!" agreed Henry.

"To think he'd play me that false! I could sue him for breach of promise!"

"Aw, leave him go! *He* ain't the only rose on the bush!"

"Do you *know* if Minnie's promised to him or if she ain't?" Irene demanded.

"Well, it certainly looks like it, don't it?—his fetchin' her here to the Fair and her dressin' fancy?"

"I don't see 'em here nowheres," said Irene suspiciously. "Hen Maus, if I find you've fooled me!"

"You'll see 'em all right if you keep on rubber-neckin' the way you've been doin' all afternoon!" growled Henry. "A nice time *I'm* havin' with you!"

"Och, you!" she poked him playfully. "Think you ain't gettin' your money's worth, don't you! Never mind, Henny! I'll make it up to you some time. But my goodness! I can't think of a thing this after * but them two!"

As the afternoon waned, however, and John and Minnie did not turn up, Irene grew more and more suspicious of Henry's having deceived and tricked her into coming to the Fair.

Henry himself was not at all interested in the non-appearance of his rival and his sister and was horribly bored by Irene's being so engrossed in it and so tragic about it.

"Mebby they up and ee-loped, or what you call it," he cruelly suggested.

"Hen Maus! You don't think John would do a trick like that on me!"

"I don't know and I don't care what John Wimmer'd do! Can't we talk about something else than John Wimmer? I have sick of him!"

"Not more'n I am!" retorted Irene spitefully. "I'm a goin' to write off a letter to him just as soon as I get home!"

"What do you want to go and do that fur? He'll think you're runnin' after him!" protested Henry

*Afternoon.

who lived in daily dread of her reconciliation with John.

"I'll tell him what I think of him!"

"So long as you don't write no love letter to him, but just sass him, all right," Henry approved.

The excursion was such a failure for them both that they returned home early, Irene angrily accusing Henry all the way back of having misled and deceived her, and he insisting that he could prove it by Minnie that John really had invited her.

Upon their arrival at the General Store, the exciting news which her parents hastened to give her—both of them leaning eagerly over the counter, side by side—that John had telephoned and asked for her. confirmed her conviction of Henry's duplicity.

"You just got me to go to the Fair along with you to make John believe me and you was promised a'ready!"

"I didn't neither! He did ast our Minnie!"

"He didn't! You're a big story teller! If he ast her, why wasn't she there with him? And now John knows from Pop that I was at the Fair with you, what *kin* he think but that we're promised?"

"Well, what if he does think it? Why need you care what a fellah thinks that likes another girl better'n he likes you? Have a little spunk about you!"

"I don't believe he thinks more of Minnie Maus than he does of me!" Irene stubbornly stuck to her

instinctive conviction in spite of all the signs to the contrary.

"Will you believe it if *Minnie* tells you he ast her to go with him along?" asked Henry. "You don't have to believe me—ast her!"

"I'd believe her sooner'n I would you, Hen Maus!"

"All right then—come on along up to our place and ast her."

They found Minnie in the kitchen preparing a frugal supper of sassafras tea, bread and molasses. She still wore her blue dress, though she had carefully covered it with two gingham aprons. She was singing as they entered the kitchen and the radiant happiness of the countenance she turned to them struck them both with a shock, though in far different ways; for to Irene it was a portent of her loss of John; and to Henry it meant renewed hope of winning the prize at his side.

"Why didn't John fetch you to the Fair along, Minnie?" Henry inquired.

"We were all ready to start—he came for me with his buggy—and then we got to talking—and—and we didn't go to the Fair."

She smiled upon them happily and they stared at her curiously.

"Now look-a-here, Minnie, *did* John Wimmer ast you, or are you kiddin'?" Irene demanded, still incredulous.

"Kiddin'?" Minnie repeated with a puzzled little

contraction of her brows that, despite the sombreness of the occasion, involuntarily brought a roar of laughter from Irene and Henry.

"Are you jollyin' us?" Henry explained.

"Making fun of you, do you mean? I wouldn't have any reason to."

"And you say John didn't fetch you to the Fair because yous was too busy talkin' together?" Irene jealously probed her.

"Partly that," Minnie answered hesitatingly. She did not like to discuss her sacred love with Irene and Henry. Not that she feared to hurt Irene. She assumed that Irene was as completely alienated from John as he evidently was from her.

"What did yous have to talk about so much?" Irene pressed her catechism.

"About—about—my dressin' fancy and all."

"What made you give up dressin' plain?" Irene darkly demanded.

"Supper's soon made," was Minnie's irrelevant reply. "Will you stay and eat along, Irene? We ain't got much—but you're welcome."

"I got to go home. We're havin' chicken and waffles," Irene cruelly added, with a disparaging glance at the table set with bread and molasses.

"Gosh!" cried Henry, smacking his lips, "I'd like to board at your place!"

"Yes, I guess anyhow you would!" retorted Irene, slapping at him jocularly. "Say, Minnie, you're awful stuck on John; ain't you are?"

Minnie, colouring, turned away to inspect her tea on the stove—and again Irene and Henry laughed uproariously.

"Mind her blushin' yet!" yelled Irene. "Well, say, Minnie, you're welcome to him! *I* don't want him!"

"I know you don't," answered Minnie as she looked around again and gravely met Irene's bold and curious gaze.

"Did *he* tell you I don't want him?"

"No, John and I have other things to talk about."

"Oh, you have, have you? Such interestin' things that you forget to come to the Fair; ain't?"

Minnie did not answer. Irene and she, though born and brought up in the same village, really lived in such different spiritual worlds that they seemed scarcely to speak the same language.

"Well, Minnie, you certainly are workin' fierce to *get* John—givin' up your religion yet! My goodness! If I couldn't get a fellah without goin' *that* far, I'd stay a old maid!"

No answer from Minnie.

"Next thing you'll be tryin' to make me believe you and John's promised yet!"

Minnie did not answer as her grave eyes looked into Irene's.

"And I wouldn't believe *that* if you stood on your head and sweared to it!" declared Irene. "So you needn't try to make me!"

"I won't try," Minnie smiled.

"Oh, you think you're much, don't you!" cried Irene angrily, her inability to provoke Minnie acting as an intolerable irritant upon herself. "*I* don't care if you're promised to him or if you ain't! It makes me nothing!"

"I know it don't," Minnie acquiesced.

"Well, *are* yous promised?" Irene demanded, unable longer to restrain her burning, envious curiosity.

"Yes, Irene."

Irene uttered a little shriek of amazement, while Henry started violently, his face and neck flushing brick red.

"Look-a-here, Minnie Maus, do you know what John Wimmer *is?*" exclaimed Irene shrilly. "He's a bigamist, that's what he is! Take warning in time and *don't you trust him!* He's a false deceiver! —that's what he is! One of these days he'll get tired of you—or get mad at you for somepin—*and out he'll hike!* And that's the last *you'll* see of him! Oh, I know him! None better! Say, Minnie—as friend to friend—*don't you trust him!*"

"I'll trust him so long as ever I breathe!" said Minnie softly.

"Och, well, if you like takin' up with another girl's leavin's, you're welcome to him! He took up with you just to spite me because I turned him down. He thinks he's payin' me back! But *I* don't care who he marries! For all I care he can marry his grandmother!"

She shrieked with laughing and Henry joined her boisterously.

"Ain't you got no pride about you, Minnie Maus, that you'd take up with a fellah that's just usin' you to spite another girl?" Irene put it to her rival straight.

"Irene," answered Minnie earnestly, "you don't understand John. It ain't in you to understand a man like John."

Before Irene could reply, Minnie turned away and left the room.

"Say, Hen!" cried Irene wildly, "that's what John phoned to our place about! He wanted to tell me he was promised to your Minnie! And gloat over me! Gee, Hen, I'm glad Pop tol' him I was at the Fair with you along! That must have spited him, ain't? Not to have the chanct to gloat over me!"

"Yes, I guess! Say, Irene, you spite him back some more—quick—leave us put it out right aways that us, *we* are promised together, too—me and you!"

"Och, Hen—well, but——" she paused to consider and weigh his suggestion, her eyes gleaming, her full bosom heaving tumultuously, while Henry gazed upon her with hungry eyes and palpitating heart.

"I got my good job now, you know, Irene," he urged eagerly. "Nine hundred dollars a year yet, mind you!"

"Yes, well, but you got to support your folks."

"Not if John marries Minnie."

"But there's your pop——"

"He kin live with Minnie and John. Minnie has so fond fur Pop, she won't want to be parted from him. Aw, go on, Irene, say yes—and come on along to town over with me to-morrow morning on the mail bust to buy a ring. Will you?"

"Hen, I—I—say, Hen, yes, I *will!*" she burst out.

Henry took her into his arms and kissed her noisily.

"Come on home to supper with me, Hen, and tell the folks. They ain't mindin' it so much now—your runnin' with me—since you're got the mail delivery."

"All right, I'll come along," Henry acquiesced, decently repressing his greedy delight (at such a time!) at the prospect of a supper of chicken and waffles instead of one of sassafras tea and "molasses bread." Even love could not make one oblivious of such an advantage.

That night when John had hurriedly finished his evening chores at the farm and was about to go forth to find Irene, wherever she might be, and try to reach with her a way out of his dilemma, a note was handed to him by Henry Maus.

His first thought was that it was from Minnie and a wild hope sprang up in his heart that she was realizing her mistake and was setting him free. For hours after leaving her to-day he had walked the floor of his room at home, torturing his soul with the unanswerable question as to whether it were not

kinder to poor little Minnie herself to tell her that he did not love her.

"No answer *wanted!*" Henry insultingly flung at him as he thrust the note into his hand and turned away.

It was written on decorated pink stationery and was loudly scented. John opened it with shaking fingers and saw at the end Irene's unfamiliar signature, for she had never written a line to him before.

Mr. John Wimmer,

Friend:—

Once you was my bosom Friend, but now you don't. And this is to give you notice that I have said Yes to Henry Maus and you needn't trouble to get me back, for you would only get spurned, so don't try to come between I and my Choise, for I don't want to be bothered with you.

Yours Respectfully,

Irene Laub.

CHAPTER VII

JUST as it had seemed to Minnie impossible that a man like John could love a girl like Irene, so it had seemed to John that Irene, whom of course he idealized, could not possibly care for a brute like Hen Maus. Therefore, while he had suffered some bitter moments from Irene's open friendliness with Henry, he had not been seriously concerned about it. His discovery, however, of Minnie's love for himself had made him ready to credit any other unexpected development of his own thoughtlessness; so that Irene's written statement that Henry was her "Choise" and that to try to win her away from him would be wasted effort, fell upon John's stunned heart with the finality of death. Incomprehensible as it was that a splendid creature like Irene could so lower herself, he could neither doubt it nor fight it. Had it not been for Minnie he *would* have fought it—would have taken his chances and pitched in—to the death; but the thought of the mortal hurt he would inflict upon Minnie stayed him. He simply could not, on a mere fighting chance, wound that tender young heart that trusted him so absolutely. She deserved better at his hands.

It was a very bitter struggle that he waged with

himself before he finally renounced all hope of ever realizing in this world the ecstasy and fullness of love, and accepted in its place the dull and meagre satisfaction of mere friendship. For he was convinced that with his loss of Irene happiness for him was eternally dead; that hereafter he must walk in shadow; the hunger of his heart and body always, always unsatisfied. A door of his soul was closed and locked, never to be opened; for the key was in the keeping of the girl he had lost.

But with all the strength of his will he resolved that never while he lived should Minnie know the truth.

"For my own peace as well as hers, I'll never leave her suspect that she don't have my heart; that she ain't my true mate."

A doubt of his ability, no matter how good his intentions, to keep such knowledge from so sensitive a soul as Minnie, was answered by his sense of how dear, after all, the girl was to him.

"It ain't as if I didn't think an awful lot of her; as if I didn't like her companionship nearly as much, indeed, as she thinks she'll like mine!" he meditated as he recalled how glowingly she had said to him, "Think of it! All our lives together, John!"

"I know she'll make me a good wife—none better could I find," he drearily tried to console himself.

"The trouble with Nature is," he reflected, "a man don't fall in love with a woman's wirtues, but with her charm. Why don't Nature make the best

women the most alluring? For that Minnie's a better and finer girl than what Irene is I'm not such a boob as not to *see*—even if I am in love with Irene as fierce as a man could otherwise be!"

It was fortunate that Minnie entirely failed to understand the sombreness of John's courting. She took it for dignified seriousness before the sacredness of their great love; before the solemnity of impending marriage. It did not dim her own radiance, though it seemed to rebuke what was almost a levity of happiness in the presence of an Altar.

"To love any one the way I love you, John, and to have you love me back again!—I never conceited that such happiness could come to me. All my life the good things that other ones had seemed to skip me. I never knew my mother; we were always poor and not much respected; Henny always used me ugly; I was always wonderful lonesome, for I never could seem to make friends wery well among the girls of Hesswille—much as I wanted to—they care so much for things I don't set any store by——"

"What are the things the other girls care for, Minnie?" asked John—and poor Minnie never suspected that his question hoped to draw from her some word about Irene as one of "the girls of Hesswille" who valued things which Minnie did not. With every nerve in his body thrilling to the name of Irene, any least word which Minnie might speak of her would feed the hunger of his heart. "What is it they like that you don't?"

"Fellahs—and dressing up all the time—and sitting 'round wasting their time. Most of the girls never think about improving themselves," said Minnie with her little air of school teacher primness which always amused John because it seemed to him like the play-acting of a child. "I'd sooner use my spare time in improving my mind than in just sitting 'round doing nothing—excepting chewing gum."

"I respect you for those sentiments, Minnie," said John gravely. "And if I may say so without insulting you, I think you'll make a most splendid mother of our children, Minnie dear."

Minnie's heart seemed to stop beating. She closed her eyes for an instant to control her dizziness.

"If I can raise a son to be the man you are, John!" she said breathlessly.

John bent to kiss very gently her trembling lips. There was no passion in his kiss, but Minnie's flaming heart did not know it.

The two engagements—that of Minnie and her brother—which were "put out" simultaneously, stirred the village to its foundations. It was generally conceded that Minnie was a better mate for John (except in a worldly and material sense) than was Irene.

"She'll make him a steadier wife. Irene she wants to be such a high-flyer!"

"And Minnie's nicer eduˊcated than what Irene is and that makes something, too, John bein' a teacher."

As for Henry, he was the wonder of the village. "Who'd of thought he'd ever turn out like this!—workin' steady at a good job and promised to a rich ketch like Irene Laub yet!"

John's mother and sisters, who adored him as a paragon of all the virtues, quite openly rejoiced at his change of sweethearts. For though of course humble little Minnie Maus was not worthy of him, yet she was at least not "so much for dress and runnin'" as Irene was; she appreciated John so much more than Irene did; she was "better dispositioned."

Their rejoicing was brought up short, however, by John's too evident wincing from it. Their disparagment of Irene was, he plainly showed, extremely distasteful to him. He even went so far as to defend her stoutly when they criticised her.

"You don't understand Irene. You never did. It ain't that she's light-minded—it's just that she's full of life and spirit. And she ain't so much ugly-dispositioned as she's just awful straightforward and outspoken. She don't do like some—talk to please the people! She says what she means."

"If you like her so well, why did you break off with her?" asked his favourite youngest sister, Jennie, who dared more liberties with her elder brother than the rest of the family ever quite ventured.

But John, instead of answering, had turned his back upon her and walked away, a white, pained look in his face that filled his loving family with dismay.

"Can it be that Irene Laub turned *him* down? But no," his eldest sister, Katy, answered her own doubt, "that could not be—as good a ketch as what our John is yet! It stands to reason!"

"Yes, anyhow!" nodded Mrs. Wimmer. "I guess *then!*"

"And when you think what Irene has took up with yet!" exclaimed Jennie. "You can't make *me* believe that a girl that could have our John would take Hen Maus! Well, I guess anyhow not!"

"Then why does John look so funny when we talk down on Irene? And he's so downhearted all the time! He don't act a bit as if he was crazy about Minnie. And he don't say nothing about when they're a-goin' to stand up before the minister—him and Minnie."

Meantime, the brightness of Minnie's joy was a trifle overshadowed by the eternal question of the wherewithal to live; for Henry not only did not provide in any way for her and her father, he did not even pay his own board. Having begun to borrow his salary in advance, he seemed to be obliged to keep on doing so; and it was not long before he became rather hopelessly involved in debt. At the same time, he stormed and raged at Minnie for the meagre meals she set before him.

"Drivin' that there truck gives me an appetite, I tell you! I can't work if I don't eat!" he would growl. "If you can't gimme decent meals, I'll go and board at the *ho*-tel!"

"You'll have to pay board there," Minnie reminded him.

"Aw, shut up! Don't you sass me about my affairs!"

"If you'll pay me half what you'd pay at the *ho*tel, Henry, I'll promise you better meals than you'd get there."

"I can't pay you nothin' till I ketch up with what I had to borrow," he crossly repulsed her. "You kin work for your own livin'! *I* ain't a-goin' to keep you! You kin make up your mind to that!"

"But I do work, don't I? I cook and wash and iron and clean for you and father. What do you do for me? You don't pay me for it. And yet you talk about my living on *you!*"

"Why don't you be a seamster, the way you said you was going to, when you lost your school?" Henry sulkily demanded.

"Be a seamster to pay for your meals?" Minnie asked. "You know that since you got the mail route, and I got engaged to John, no one brings me sewing; they can't believe I want it. And then I guess they think I don't know the styles, me being a Mennonite so long. Anyhow, they don't hire me. Emmy Slathauer gets all the sewing that's hired in Hesswille. But I'm not asking you to keep me—I'm only asking you to keep yourself; to pay for your own meals."

Henry's reply to such unanswerable statements was usually to take himself off with an oath.

When the pinch of poverty at home became too uncomfortable, he succeeded in persuading Irene (by means of such appeals to her passion for him as he knew how to make) to be married very suddenly; upon which he promptly packed his belongings and went to live on the fat of the land at his father-in-law's.

"We charge you no board," Mr. Laub kindly told him, "because we know you got to help Minnie and your pop. All we ast fur your board is that you haul our goods free on your truck and tend store Saturday evenings still."

Henry cheerfully acquiesced in this benevolent arrangement for enabling him to help Minnie and his father. He was perfectly willing to keep that part of the bargain by which he cheated the United States mail service of Mr. Laub's fee for carrying his merchandise; but to "tend store Saturday evenings still" was another matter.

"We'll see about that!" said Henry to himself.

Minnie, after her brother left home, had so much less work to do and so much time on her hands, that she tried hard to find some way of earning money that would not hurt John's pride. But as she could get no sewing to do, there seemed to be no work in the village which the promised bride of John Wimmer could do without humiliating not only him, but his "folks."

The prospect of marrying John not only without the usual "aus dire," but without even necessary clothing, was deeply mortifying to Minnie.

"He's worthy of the best! And me—what am I?"

If she could only earn enough to buy food for herself and her father and some over to purchase "goods" for her wedding outfit, she could make it herself. She would have plenty of time to do it, for John had not yet asked her to name the day. She wondered sometimes whether it was the prospect of having her father live with them that held her lover back.

"Are you willing, Henny," she asked her brother one day, a few weeks after his marriage, when she happened to encounter him at the General Store, "to leave John support your own father after we are married, and you not give a cent toward it, when you're earning so much?"

"If John's fool enough to do it, I'm sure it don't make me nothing!" Henry laughed.

"I know you don't have much shame about you, Henny. But haven't you *any*—that you'd leave another man support your own aged and feeble father?"

"I'm married and got a wife to keep!"

"Her father keeps her—and you, too!"

"What's that to you? You mind your own business!"

"Won't you give anything at all toward supporting father?"

"What fur should I support Pop? He never supported me!"

There came a day when even Doctor Maus realized

that they were at the end of their rope and must find some means of averting actual want. He was too old to start in working himself, after years of idleness during which his belief in his divine mission of healing had kept him a dependent upon his too amiable young daughter. But now that she, the only prop of his old age, had failed him (through no fault of hers, he knew well) he was forced to face a situation which he would have preferred to ignore.

"I'll go talk to Henny," he told Minnie.

"No use, father. He won't help us."

"I know Henny was always a little selfish that way; but if I tell him we're hungry and cold—well, he's anyhow my own son, Minnie, and he's human! I can't believe he won't help us when he's earnin' such good pay."

"You'd better not ask him, father—he'll only abuse you."

"You hadn't ought to talk down on your brother so, Minnie—it ain't nice of you."

"I'm only trying to save you from having your feelings hurt, father."

But her father, always inclined to believe that other people were as generous with their worldly goods as he was with his prayers, determined to put Henry to the test. So, one Saturday evening, just as John Wimmer arrived, as usual, to take Minnie buggy-riding, the doctor slipped out of the house and made his way feebly down the length of the village to the garage where the mail truck was kept, and

where he was pretty sure to find Henry loafing with several other villagers—though that young bridegroom was supposed to be, at this hour, "tending store" to pay for his board in his father-in-law's home.

"Kin I speak to you alone for a minute, Henny?" the doctor timidly summoned his son from the group surrounding him. "It's some important."

Henry knew that anything that could goad his father to exercising such unwonted energy as to walk the length of the village to seek a thing he usually avoided—an interview with himself—must indeed be "some important."

He leisurely extricated himself from his cronies and led his parent away from them to the other end of the building.

"What d'you come here bothering me about?" he asked in a surly tone as he leaned against the wall and picked his teeth with a straw.

"I guess you'll have to help us a little, Henny—we ain't got nothing in the house to eat and ain't had all day! To-morrow's Sabbath and we ain't got nothing laid in for meals. The stores won't give us credit no more. Mr. Laub won't leave us charge nothing. He says he's got enough to do to feed you, without feedin' all the rest of the fambly. Minnie had so faint and sick all day, she could har'ly dress herself to go buggy-ridin' along, when John come fur her."

"Why don't you try your prayin' stunt on your-

self? *Pray* fur purvisions oncet!" Henry scornfully mocked him.

"It ain't no use to pray fur un-impossible things, Henny. Us we can't get food without money to pay fur it."

"Why should I give you money to keep you? You never kep' me, did you? And now in your old age you want to live on me!"

"I'd work now if I wasn't too feeble! We never was so bad off as what we are now!"

"Why don't Minnie get to work and earn something?"

"She says the only work she *could* get in the willage would be to go out washing—and that would disgrace John and his folks. And your Irene neither wouldn't like it so well to have her mister's sister go out washing."

"Och, her! It makes nothing what she likes! Nor it makes nothing what John Wimmer likes! Why don't he git married to Minnie and *keep* her if he's too stuck up to leave her work?"

"Would you leave John Wimmer support *me*, Henny, and you not help?"

"Look-a-here, I tell you I don't owe you nothin'! You never did nothing *fur* me!"

"Yes, I did. I—I loved you, Henny!"

"It didn't feed my stummeek—your lovin' me!" sneered Henry.

"Well, but Minnie, *she* did a-plenty fur you. Won't you help her any?"

"Leave her help herself. I got enough on my hands."

"But, Henny, I tell you we ain't got nothing to eat in the house! Us we're starvin', Henry! Gimme a dollar to buy food fur us!" cried the old man desperately.

"I ain't got but seventy cents and I got *use* fur it! I tol' you often enough a'ready how dumb and ignorant you was not to charge nothing fur your prayin'—but no, you wouldn't never listen on me! So now then you needn't come whimperin' to *me* about your hard luck! Leave some of your grateful patients help you out. Go to *them!*"

"Henny! Me and Minnie we're *hungry!* Gimme that seventy cents you got!"

"I won't! And you git on out of here now and quit your botherin' me!"

He turned away, but his father caught his arm and stopped him.

"Help us, Henny—for God's sake!"

Henry shook him off. "You *deserve* your sufferin' fur wastin' your time prayin'! I wouldn't help if I had a-plenty!"

"I never did you no harm, Henny!"

"You never did me no good! Leave go my arm and go on home!"

But the old man tightened his grip. "I can't believe my own son would near treat me like this—I——"

"Well, I'll prove it to you that your own son won't

give you a thing more'n you ever give him. Go on home now, I tell you—damn you! You and Minnie can go to hell fur all I care!"

He jerked his arm free and slouched back to his companions, who with mingled curiosity and amusement had witnessed his "row" with his "old man."

Meantime, Minnie at home was going through an experience almost as strenuous as that which her father was having with his son.

When John led her out of the house to lift her into his high buggy she had suddenly and without notice fainted in his arms.

The shock which her death-like stillness gave him, as he bore her limp body back into the house, revealed to him how dear to him she had grown.

In his search for restoratives, when he had lain her on the kitchen settee, he had another shock at sight of a larder so absolutely empty that he understood with a terrible certainty the cause of poor little Minnie's illness.

The first thing he did after she "came to," was to borrow some milk from a neighbour, heat it and feed it to her with a spoon, as he would have fed a sick baby.

Then, his arm about her, her head on his breast, his gentle, strong hand smoothing her hair from her pale forehead, she confessed to him her struggles of the past few months.

He reproached her, of course, for not having told

him of her difficulties. "Ain't I your man?—to stand between you and troubles like this?"

"You ain't my man *yet*—and I didn't feel I had the right to burden you until I'm giving you in return all that a wife can give, John."

"You're giving me an awful lot every day of your life, Minnie! I don't know how I could bear up and live if it wasn't for you!"

It did not occur to Minnie to wonder what he had to "bear up" against.

"I'm so glad if I *am* something to you, John!" she responded, the light coming into her eyes which any word of love from him always brought there.

"To think of a great hulk of a man like me eating three square meals a day and you—a dainty little girl like you!—say, Minnie! The citizens of this village ought to take Hen's job away from him! He's no right to it. They got it for him to help you out—because they had to take your school from you—not because they wanted to favour Hen."

"Yes—I know."

"I never suspected for a minute that he wasn't keeping you and your father!"

"He has never given us a penny."

"You mean since—since he got married?" John gulped.

"Nor before that. Never one cent."

"Och, now, Minnie! If any one but you told me that, I couldn't credit it that a man could be that hoggish!"

"Yes, ain't!" sighed Minnie.

"Does he *know* how you and your father are faring just now?"

"It wouldn't make any difference to him."

"But I'm sure it must, Minnie dear. *Can* he forget how you always kept him—clothed and fed him and worked for him? But no," John added, shaking his head hopelessly, "I mind how he wouldn't even do so much as carry a bucket of water for you on wash day—when you were supporting him! It wonders me how a thing in human form could be that low down! Ain't, Minnie?"

"Henny never thanked me in his life for anything I ever did for him," Minnie admitted.

"What kind of a husband is he going to make for poor Irene!" John faltered.

"He's afraid of Irene," said Minnie. "She can take her own part."

"I'm glad to hear it! If I ever hear of his abusin' her, I'll——"

He checked himself, his face red with embarassment.

"I have given a great deal of reflection, Minnie, to some things," he said ponderously, "about human life. I don't favour prisons or punishment of criminals. I think hopeless criminals should be segre*ga*ted that way, on an island, and left to govern themselves—or destroy themselves. Punishing don't do them any good; it only makes those that do the punishing wery brutal. But when it comes to a

case like Hen—that's had loving kindness shown to him all his life—and forbearance and patience—then I'm for——"

He paused and looked so grim that Minnie smiled. "I'm glad you can be stern as well as kind, John—it makes you so inter*est*ing!"

"We must get married right away, Minnie—to-morrow morning early already. I'd say to-night, but you're too weak to drive to town to the preacher's."

"Oh!" Minnie caught her breath and the colour flew to her white face. "But I ain't got any clothes, John. I hadn't any money to buy any, and—and——"

"We'll get what you need as soon as you're Mrs. Wimmer," John said as he closed her lips with a kiss. "I'd take you right to the farm till we got this house done over for us, but on account of your father I guess I better come right here to live—and we can have the house done over a little at a time."

"Do you have objections, John, of keeping father?" Minnie timidly asked.

"Of course not, Minnie. If you wasn't worth *that* much to me——"

They were interrupted by the entrance of Doctor Maus. White and gaunt-eyed, he came staggering into the kitchen and sank into the nearest chair. He was evidently too weak and wretched to note the strangeness of the fact that his daughter lay prone upon the big wooden settee which stood against the wall and that John, sitting at one end of it, held her head against his breast.

"Water!" gasped the old man. "I have sick!"

Minnie tried to get up to help John minister to her father, but though she managed to give him the settee and take his chair, she had to leave it to John to heat and feed to him the rest of the milk which had been borrowed.

When the doctor had rallied enough to talk to them, he told them, with a fire of indignation in his eyes such as Minnie had never seen in them before in all her life, of his appeal to his son.

"I went to him—my own son—and told him that his sister and me, his father, was hungry!—starving! And he turned me off with a curse! He cursed me! Sayed he wouldn't help us if he had a-plenty! And he *cursed* me yet!"

"Never mind, father!" Minnie soothed him, for he was working himself into a frenzy. "Don't mind Henny—he don't mean all he says."

"He means it that much that he'll leave us die of starvation before he'll help us!—and him with full and plenty!"

"There, there, Doc," said John, "your troubles are over now, for I'm going to take care of you and Minnie both after this. Minnie and I are getting married to-morrow. What do you think of that?"

"And—and me?" faltered the old man. "Minnie! You won't desert me, too, will you—like Henny?"

When they had reassured and comforted him, John helped him to his bed; and shortly afterward he took his leave.

"I must go home and pack my trous*seau*," he grinned as he kissed her good-bye. "Ain't, little wife?"

"And me, I ain't got any to pack!" said Minnie wistfully, though her eyes beamed with happiness. "It seems, John, as if it couldn't be that I am getting married to you to-morrow!"

John kissed her again—a little hastily—and then hurried away.

CHAPTER VIII

BUT John did not go directly home to pack his "trous*seau*." Hitching his horse to a tree a little distance from the Maus's home, and taking with him the carriage whip which, by the way, he never used on his horse, he strolled through the empty village street. It was after ten o'clock and nearly everyone in Hessville was abed.

John considered very earnestly, as he wandered about, his whip tucked under his arm, the step he was going to take on the morrow.

He was going to be married!—and to another than Irene! His passionate rebellion of a few months back had changed to a dogged submission to the inevitable; but there were recurrent hours of longing that were devastating; and this to-night was one of them. If it were rosy, radiant, queenly Irene that was going to be his bride!

He tried to crush from his heart such disloyalty—for therein lay madness!

"How can I hope to be a good husband to Minnie, feeling the way I do about Irene? How can I be as true to Minnie as I expect her to be to me?—true even in her secret thoughts? How would I feel if I knew she was longing for another man——"

But John realized ruefully that one cannot reason with one's appetites and emotions; there was the fact before him—he loved Irene; and Minnie he did not love—not, at any rate, with the passion that demanded marriage.

His meditative wandering brought him at last to the only lighted building in the village—the garage where Henry Maus still loafed with his cronies. John felt, as he drew near to it, a tingling sensation along his strong right arm; some deep, prophetic instinct told him that an effective means of working off the feverish restlessness of his soul to-night would be to let out with all his might his long-repressed indignation against the brother of his bride, the husband of the woman he coveted.

Clutching his riding whip, he stalked into the garage.

Henry was sprawled on a bench, his hands under his head, his five companions sitting or lying all about him, smoking, chewing, chuckling over a nasty yarn that one of them was relating.

The appearance of John, whom all the village held in a curious respect, startled the group into an astonished silence. Two of them, who were young pupils of his, shrank in shame at being discovered listening to a ribald story.

John walked straight to the bench where Henry lay and jerked him to his feet by his collar. A flourish of his whip scattered his five companions like chaff. They fled ignominiously from the spot.

Henry was a burly fellow, but John's choking clutch on his collar found him helpless. He was white to the lips with fright, for, being a bully, he was of course a great coward.

"You lee' me be!" he gasped, his teeth chattering. "I never done *you* nothing!"

"If I give you your deserts, I'll lash you until you're as weak as your starving father and sister are to-night!" said John. He spoke with a grim quiet that was far more terrifying than loud anger, while he tightened like a vise his hold on his victim's collar. "If I thought this whip would cut through to your soul (if you've got a soul) I'd beat you till I got there. But, dirty dog that you are, I think it would be wasted work. It ain't in you to be decent and that's all there is to it. So if I did beat you up it would only be giving myself a rare treat that wouldn't do you (nor me) any good. I can hardly trust myself to begin to beat you—I might kill you! Murder ain't the worst crime—it would be a holy act to kill a vicious cur like you that ain't any good to yourself or any one else. Listen to me, Hen Maus! If ever in all my life I hear of your giving grief or trouble to Irene Laub, you'll reckon with me! Do you understand?"

He paused for a reply, but Henry was sullenly silent.

"Answer me!" demanded John, shaking him like a rat. "Do you understand?"

"That's a nice way fur *Minnie's* fellah to be

talkin' about another girl, ain't it?—and that other girl *married* yet! Where's your morals at?" gasped Henry, his tone more abject than defiant.

"Answer me!" repeated John. "Do you understand that you'll reckon with *me* if ever you hurt a hair of Irene's head?"

"You better talk about Irene's hurtin' *my* hairs! It's her does the hair pullin'. Ha!" Henry feebly laughed. "Irene kin take her own part—you're got no need to worry about *her!*"

The picture evoked by these words, of the degrading relation Irene bore to this brute—Irene, the "rare and radiant maiden," idealized and adored, made John suddenly feel limp; all the vim and fire went out of him; his hand dropped from his captive's neck; he leaned weakly against the wall.

"Get out!" he said hoarsely. "Go before I kill you!"

Henry needed no second bidding. In an instant he was out of the building and speeding toward the General Store.

John, getting himself together, made his way slowly, and with a heart of lead, back to his buggy.

The next day Hessville was electrified with the news that Minnie Maus and John Wimmer had gone to town to "stand up before the minister."

John took his bride for a two days' wedding journey to visit his married sister in Philadelphia. It was Minnie's first sight of a big city and her naïve wonder and delight were very entertaining to John,

who, from what he considered his very extensive knowledge of life, found great pleasure, school teacher as he was, in instructing her innocence and ignorance.

"Ain't, John, all the ladies have pretty complexions in Philadelphia—even the old ones yet!" she wonderingly exclaimed as they walked down Chestnut Street on Sunday afternoon.

"Minnie! These painted up women in big cities are a lot of syreens and lure-lyes! Not fit for a pure maiden like you to look at!"

"Painted! Are their complexions painted yet?" asked Minnie in great surprise.

"They mostly are," affirmed John with the conviction of one who knows the wicked world. "The life of a great city is wery degenerate, Minnie!"

"But there are so *many* of these pretty-complected women, John—are they *all* sy-reens and lure-lyes—or whatever?" inquired Minnie, appalled.

"Well, that I couldn't rightly say—that they're *all* bad."

"Some of them look so nice!" said Minnie. "And the ones that look the nicest ain't so fancy dressed either," she added, a quick, instinctive discrimination having noted the superior beauty of simplicity. "I sometimes think the wreath on my hat is too thick. When I get home I'll make some of it off. I have a little too much flowers at."

"But it becomes you something surprising!" said John kindly.

"I like to look nice for your sake," she returned,

nestling a bit closer to his arm, her face illumined; and John, as he looked down into that glowing face, metaphorically called upon his own head the maledictions of the gods, should he ever by word or act hurt or grieve this sweet and tender girl whom life had given to him to protect and cherish.

His sister, who had been living in Philadelphia for six months, languishing with homesickness for Hessville, was pathetically glad to see her brother and his bride.

"I can't home myself here in this here big place," she told them tearfully. "Folks here in Phil-delphy spend so! Och, it takes my breath how they spend! And when I won't spend so reckless, too, then they think I'm near with my money that way!"

"You needn't care what other ones think, Martha," said John, "so long as *you're* satisfied."

"Yes, well, but I ain't like you, John, not to care what other ones think. I know you never cared; and folks always seemed to hold you all the higher for not caring."

"It's more to me what I think of myself than what other ones think of me," said John—and Minnie, her soul in her eyes, gazed at him admiringly.

"It seems so queer to me the way folks like to do here in this city," continued his sister. "There's a house 'round the corner that has thirty rooms in and only a man and his son living in it, with a whole lot of hired help. Why, I heerd they keep one man just to do nothing at all but answer the front door bell and

show wisitors in the parlour and then holler fur Mister and his son to come to the parlour. An able-bodied man doin' nothing but that! Yes, it would wonder you the way the folks that keeps hired help wants to be waited on! It don't seem like Christians."

"And it ain't either," agreed John. "I think the day will come when no one will have wealth to spend that he didn't work for."

"There's them that tells me," said Martha, "that Phil-delphy ain't in it with Paris for grandness! Just to think!"

"Paris is pretty—so considered anyhow," John granted, "but after all, there ain't any place like Hesswille."

"I think, too," smiled Minnie.

"Yes, and me, too!" sighed Martha. "I wisht Mister was located there instead of here where I can't home myself. I'll have homesick worse than ever when yous go home! Can't yous stay over till a couple days more?"

"I couldn't wery well let father alone any longer, Martha," pleaded Minnie. "Thank you kindly. We only left him food enough to last two days—wegetables and sausage from your father's farm that John brought in."

"And we have to get at and fix our house," added John—and Minnie thrilled to hear him call it "our" house. "We're going to make it as homelike as we can. I got a little saved toward it. To be sure, not quite enough. We'll have to go in debt a little."

"But you'll soon get that paid off," Martha encouraged them, "with Minnie being the saving housekeeper she is and you making such good money, John, and livin' in such a cheap place like what Hesswille is. Here, no matter what Mister earns, it *takes* it all just to set the table."

"And that man and his son in a thirty-room house with a lot of hired girls!" said John. "There's something ain't right about it—they with full and plenty and not working—and you, no matter how hard you work, with hardly enough to get along."

Meantime, Doctor Maus's loneliness at home was broken by an amazing variation of the monotony. On Monday morning, a few hours before the expected return of the bride and groom, he received a letter from a lawyer. Not in many years had the mail brought any letters to the Maus household except from sick people who wanted help. But this letter was not from one of these. Its contents fairly stunned the recipient for a time. But presently, when he had recovered a little from the shock, he began to feel glad that it had happened in Minnie's absence, for that gave him time to think it over and decide what to do about it.

"I ain't got long to live no more—I feel I ain't," he thought. "Minnie's took good care of me all her life since she was big enough. Henny he never did nothing but abuse me. Now, then, Minnie's got married and she's did grand for herself, marryin' John Wimmer with a good moral character and a

good job and a rich pop. Will she stick by me now that she's so well-fixed? Will her Mister persuade her to turn me off and put me to the county poor house? I can't look to Henny for nothing. It's up to Minnie. Well, till I see oncet how they treat me, I ain't sayin' a word *to* 'em about this here grateful patient. I'll hide this here letter good—till a while yet."

So he hid his letter away very carefully and cunningly—to bide his time.

CHAPTER IX

THE tumbledown old Maus home was in so much worse condition than John had realized that when the necessary repairs and alterations were only half finished he had used up all that he had saved in three years and so the debt he was obliged to contract far exceeded his calculations. His well-to-do father would not give him a dollar, so he was obliged to square his broad shoulders to bear the burden of supporting a household and paying a large annual interest on a mortgage.

It was more than he had bargained for. He hated debt. He could know no peace until he was rid of it. His face, after a time, began to look careworn.

"I could skimp and deny myself till it's paid a'ready, but I hate to skimp Minnie. She's never had anything in her life—no pleasures, no pretty clothes, not a thing that other young girls always had. And debt or no debt, I'm darned if I don't see to it that she gets some fun *now!*"

But as the cost of the house repairing mounted higher and higher with the progress of the work, other expenses piled themselves upon the pyramid. Doctor Maus fell ill and had to have a physician and medicine. And one day Minnie told him the very

welcome news that they were going to have a child. Welcome in spite of the fact that, from the experience of his sister Martha, he knew that the cost of a baby was, in these days, almost prohibitive. A baby was, indeed, an expensive luxury. How, on seventy-five dollars a month for eight months of the year, he was going to be able to meet all these expenses, was a puzzle.

"Mebby I'll have to *let* teaching and go to other work," he thought with a sinking heart. Teaching was the work he did best; the work he most loved to do. He would hate to give it up.

"Is everything I care for being taken from me? Am I a Job?" he sadly wondered.

To be sure, he was not insensible of the compensations that came with his trials. If Minnie was not the bride of his passion and yearning, she was at least so comforting and interesting a companion that he never parted from her without a sense of missing her and never returned to her without eagerness. Her advice and assistance in his school work, especially in the problem of understanding girls, her sympathy with and comprehension of his quite unusual aims and ideals, the stimulous of her own enthusiasm for his work, were not only invaluable to him, but a great delight.

"We always seem to have so much of interest between us," he reflected. "She's got good brains, Minnie has, the way she understands even the politics yet, that she reads in the newspapers! I

never knew another girl I could conwerse to about inter*est*ing subjects the way I can to Minnie. That's a great point in a wife!"

When, after a time, her condition made it necessary to hire the washing, and when the physician ordered a special diet and an expensive tonic for Doctor Maus, John saw that he could never hope to work his way out financially through school teaching; he would simply have to make up his mind to resign from his school and find more lucrative employment.

With a heavy heart he planned to spend the few days' vacation at Christmas time in looking for a position in the near-by town of Lancaster.

He did not tell Minnie of his intention. She was so proud of his being "the teacher," and she would so grieve over his sacrifice; for she knew how he loved his work. In her condition she must be spared as much as possible from the anxieties of their limited means. He could not shield her from them entirely; she knew there was not money to buy the necessary baby clothes and that they would have to charge a bill at the General Store for that precious little outfit; she knew, also, that their weekly bill for groceries and meat could not always be met promptly and that the mounting doctor's bill for her father could not be paid for a long time. These things clouded not a little the brightness of her happy love.

Meantime, the sick old man, Doctor Maus, was silently observing the conditions in his home as he had never before in all his life taken cognizance of the

practical difficulties of existence. His recent new experience of suffering from actual hunger; the shock of discovering that his only son would see him starve before he would put himself out to help him; and the subsequent shock of that astounding letter from the lawyer of a grateful patient, had all combined to rouse him to a realization of some things which he had hitherto taken entirely for granted.

He saw himself helpless, useless, dependent upon the charity of his daughter's husband, yet furnished with delicacies to tempt his sick palate, while his son-in-law, accustomed to the abundant table of the Wimmer farm, now half starved himself to keep down the store bill. He saw himself made comfortable in an orderly bedroom while John and Minnie, during the upheaval of remodelling the house, made the best of a room in the loft. He saw Minnie awkwardly trying to make shirts and collars for John who was used to wearing the kind you bought at a "Gent's Furnishing" shop at Lancaster. He saw his young daughter's pathetic efforts at devising a baby's outfit from scraps and patches.

One evening when Minnie, suffering from backache, had gone to bed early, the old man called John to his bedside.

"I ain't got long to live no more, John."

"So the doctor says, father."

"I see how I never done right by Minnie."

John did not reply.

"But I never rightly knowed I was not doing my

dooty to my child. She's a prize you're got, John! Fur all that I never done nothing much fur her, she always done all she could fur me. And she never blamed me, neither, nor treated me ugly."

"Why don't you say all this to her?" asked John.

"I'm a-goin' to before I die a'ready. But to-night I got to talk to you. It's about a matter that's some important. I choosed this evening when Minnie's not round."

"All right, father," John replied, drawing his chair closer and folding his arms. "I'm ready."

"It's about Henny, John."

John saw what was coming. He was going to be asked to take over yet another financial burden; to look after Hen and not let him come to want, if the Laubs threw him out—which some day they would certainly do. Rumour said that they were threatening to do so; for not only had he lost his rural delivery job, but he had been found by his father-in-law to be an entirely unreliable assistant in the General Store. Of these facts John, in common with all Hessville, was aware.

He made a quick decision as he waited for the sick man to continue. "I'll ease his mind for him about his good-for-nothing son, so he can die in peace; I'll promise any old thing. But Hen Maus would not enjoy himself living on *me!*"

"Henny wasn't never a good son to me," resumed Doctor Maus, "nor a good brother to Minnie."

"Right you are, father."

"When I went to him, starving—he cursed me! And turned me away!"

"He'll reap what he has sowed!" said John grimly.

"It wouldn't be fair to Minnie and you, fur me to leave my—my *es*tate—so as Henny could get any of it away from Minnie."

"This house, you mean?" inquired John, suppressing a smile at hearing the little old frame dwelling called an "estate." "But we did arrange that, you know, before I began the repairs. Do you forget that the deed to the property is in Minnie's name?" he asked in some surprise, for Doctor Maus had never, in all his illness, shown any signs of a mental breakdown.

"To be sure I don't forget—my mind ain't gone nowheres," the doctor reassured him. "It ain't this old shanty I had reference to when I referred to my *es*tate."

"Oh! So you've got another estate, have you, concealed somewheres about you?" smiled John indulgently. He could not imagine what the old man was driving at.

"Yes, I have. And after I'm dead, I want fur you and Minnie to have all and Henny none. I've been thinking, while I was laying here, how I could so fix it that Henny can't get none. You see, a will couldn't fix it so, fur Henny he could break the will and take one half. And that I don't want and won't have."

"Raving delirious!" thought John, regarding the doctor anxiously. "I wonder if I better call Minnie."

"Henny don't deserve nothing off of me!" repeated Maus.

"That he don't!" John humoured him.

"Not oncet was he in to see me since I had so sick!"

"If you want him, I'll bring him to you."

"No, you needn't to trouble. It's you and Minnie, and not Henny, that's taking care of me and denyin' yourselfs to give to me! I see it plain enough! And so, I'm fixin' it that yous two get all."

"Thanks," said John kindly—and added to himself, "for nothing!"

"The way I'm doin' it is this—I'm makin' it over to you before I die. Right aways. And I'm givin' it to *you*, because Minnie she's just that soft-hearted, she'd share up with Henny, *whether* or no."

"Where is this great estate, father? Have you been speculating in Wall Street, or whatever?"

"You said where it was—concealed somewheres about me. I got it under the mattress."

John was startled. There was no glare of delirium in the doctor's eyes; he spoke calmly and deliberately; yet his words were madness.

John half rose to go and consult Minnie about it, when the patient, lifting himself with a great effort, got his hand under the edge of the mattress and drew forth an envelope.

"There's my *es*tate!" he gasped, thrusting the envelope at John and sinking back again, exhausted,

among his pillows. "A grateful patient died and inherited it to me!"

"Did he die of your prayin'?" demanded John.

"I cured him of cancer by the power of prayer. Then he up and died of consumption. The doctors claimed that that's what ailed him all along—consumption. When I cured his cancer, they claimed he didn't never have no cancer. Yes, that's how ignorant they are yet! But *he* knowed I cured his cancer. 'Doc,' he sayed to me, 'I'd be a well man if it wasn't fur this here damned consumption that's got me now!' he sayed. 'If you'd of come to me sooner,' I tol' him, 'before it got sich a headway on you, I'd of cured you of it. But now it's went too far fur the power of prayer to reach,' I tol' him."

"Is prayer limited, then, in its reaching power?" asked John.

"No, but faith is. Oncet one of your lungs is away, it takes more'n mortal faith to believe that prayer can restore that there lung in your chest. Open that there en*vel*ope, John. That there's my *es*tate. I got it the day you and Minnie was married. I kep' it from yous till I seen oncet how yous would treat me. Yes, when yous two didn't know I had a dollar in the world, yous both treated me as good as yous otherwise could. So now I make over to yous my whole *es*tate—on condition of a promise."

John, not expecting much, if, indeed, anything at all, drew forth the letter from the lawyer of the grateful patient, who had written to inform Doctor

Maus that he was the sole heir to an estate worth thirty thousand dollars, consisting of a large farm equipped with live stock, farm implements, a large dwelling-house, barns, and outhouses A purchaser offered to buy it at once for thirty thousand dollars.

"I wrote off a letter to the lawyer," explained Doctor Maus, "telling him I agreed to sell. So he sold and sent me that there check fur thirty thousand dollars"—pointing to the green slip of paper attached to the letter. "I got it deposited in the Hesswille bank. It's waiting there fur you, John. Now I want to make it out payable to you—on one condition."

John's first feeling, when he could think through his dazed amazement, was a great thankful relief that he need not now give up his school. After that, his emotions crowded upon him almost too fast for recognition; the lifting of the strain of anxiety, the trained nurse for Minnie, the now accessible baby outfit, the more abundant food which Minnie's health demanded, the payment of all their debts, the nice furniture they could buy for their home. The world in a moment became transformed.

"Och!"—he suddenly recalled something—"Now I understand why that bank clerk, Ben Heinzleman, looked so funny, still, whenever I went to the bank! I used to tell him, still, that he acted like as if he had a joke on me up his sleeve!"

"And he had, too," smiled the doctor feebly.

"He knowed what you didn't suspicion—that you had a rich father-in-law! Ain't?"

"I certainly never guessed that I had married the daughter of a Plute yet!"

"No, I guess anyhow not!"

"What will Minnie say!" exclaimed John joyously. "I feel like wakin' her up to tell her such good news!"

"No—I got to talk to you—and there ain't such a lot of time left no more, John. Anyhow the news would excite Minnie and keep her awake, and she needs her rest. It'll be time enough to tell her till morning."

"All right, father."

"She'll be glad more fur your sake than fur her own. I think she was feelin' it some that me and her was a burden to you."

"Minnie surely knows she's all my comfort and happiness in life," said John humbly.

"I'm glad and thankful she's got such a good Mister!"

"That condition you make, father? I guess it is that Minnie and I pass our promise to take care of Henny if he needs us—ain't?"

"That you *don't* take care of Henny! That you never give him a dollar of this here fortune. I see now how wrong I brang up my son. This here money would only do him harm. The best thing fur Henny is to be throwed on hisself, with no one to turn to. It's the only thing will make a man of him—if anything kin do it. Indeed I wisht Minnie hadn't of always stood between *me* and want! I tell

you, John, I learnt more from them couple days' hunger that time, just before you and Minnie got married together, than anything ever learnt me! I only wisht I'd knowed it sooner!"

"I guess hunger is some teacher!" nodded John.

"You bet you! So, then, I want to give *you* this here thirty thousand dollars—now—to-night. I'll write you off such a check—*if* you'll pass me your promise you won't give none of it to Henny."

"Make your check out to Minnie, not to me—and I promise you I'll see to it that she keeps the money herself and don't give any of it to her brother. I do have some influence with my wife, you know," smiled John.

"Yes, I took notice to it a'ready." The doctor nodded and smiled over the joke.

"Hen will raise an awful row, you know, father, when he finds out about this thirty thousand dollars."

"But he can't make Minnie no trouble when the money is hern since before I am deceased a'ready, kin he?" asked the doctor anxiously.

"He can*not!*" responded John with relish. He found himself anticipating Henry's chagrin with considerable satisfaction.

"All right, then, John—you git me the pen and ink and that there spare check I fetched from the bank along—before I had so sick—it's in the Bible layin'—at the Book of Job."

"At the Book of Job!" laughed John. "Well, well, that's a co-in-*ci*-dence!"

He rose, opened the Book, and found the blank check.

CHAPTER X

DIFFICULT as it was to hide one's personal affairs in a place like Hessville, the financial perplexities with which John and Minnie had been wrestling were unsuspected by the general public. It was known, of course, that a mortgage rested upon their renovated home; but then John had "prospects," his father being rich; and his salary, for the simple life of the village, being large. So no one dreamed of the desperate anxieties, the severe deprivations, which the young couple were enduring.

When a week after Doctor Maus's revelation of his "*es*tate," his physician told Minnie and John, one morning, that the old man would die before night, Minnie asked John to notify her brother.

But Henry did not show himself at his old home until he came with his wife to attend his father's funeral.

Minnie knew, the moment she saw him, that he was not wholly unaffected by his father's death. She had never seen him so subdued, so self-effacing, so white and almost scared. This was evidently an occasion to him of solemnity and awe, if not of some remorse. Perhaps it was shame that had kept him from his father's bedside. She hoped so.

It was at this funeral of their father-in-law that Irene and John, for the first time since their separation on that fatal circus day, came together once more in a personal relation.

That was a bitter hour to Irene, as she sat with the "mourners," during the service, in an upper chamber of John Wimmer's home, where the few relatives of the deceased were gathered. The contrast between the husband at her side and the man, seated across the room, whom she might have married, was so painfully glaring to-day. Henny, a failure, discredited, mistrusted; John, a success, respected, influential, holding the high-class job of Principal of the Hessville school, with "prospects" from the rich estate of his father—Irene realized more poignantly than ever before what a "mean trick" her own senseless perversity had played upon her.

"I sure done poor fur myself!" she thought, with a spiteful glance in the direction of her husband.

She did not doubt that everyone in that room—all the Wimmers, all the Laubs, all the Mauses for miles 'round—must be thinking, as she was, of how poorly she had "done," and her pride winced miserably; for what her neighbours thought of her meant much to Mrs. Henry Maus.

"If I was married to John, all the girls would have jealous! But Hen Maus! They *pity* me! *Me!* That could have had my pick!"

She inspected Minnie curiously, sitting at John's side at the other end of the room, dressed in black,

listening tearfully to the voice of the preacher coming to them from the hall below. She saw with a start that Minnie was pregnant. That was one thing at least that she did not envy her.

"But it ain't spoiled her complexion any—she's awful nice-complected!" she observed.

She saw, with a pang, how attentive and solicitous was John's bearing toward his bereaved wife. Henry's marital ways were so "rough and common." As Irene was by nature domineering and self-willed, it was a constant irritation to her that her husband was a man who could more than match her at the game of bullying. If John were her husband, she could derive some enjoyment and satisfaction from the practice of that gentle art.

"I always thought I'd spend my married life twisting John Wimmer round my little finger! And now I ain't even got the chanct to!"

To be sure, experience had taught her that there was a limit past which no woman could go in "fooling" with John.

She would have been amazed and triumphant had she had the slightest inkling of the hot tumult in John's heart just now at finding himself in the same room with her; if she had known that her mere presence so near to him, her regal step across the chamber, her rich, warm colouring against her sombre black, her broad shoulders like an athletic boy's, her full bosom and dainty ankles, were shaking John to the foundations of his soul. She did

not dream that his pallor was due to aught else than the sombreness of the occasion, his sympathy with the sorrow of his wife, the harrowing words of the village preacher (who if he failed to harrow, would greatly disappoint).

On his side, John was feeling deeply horrified at the intensity of the emotion which the sight of Irene called up in him. An hour before, the Madonna-like softness of Minnie's pensive face enshrouded in its black veil, as she had mournfully taken leave of the only parent she had ever known, had called forth all the tenderness of which he thought he was capable. And now, how tame and colourless seemed her daintiness in the presence of the riotous beauty, the strong personality, of the woman he coveted! What an awful thing was such a passion as this—which made him, against his will disloyal to his wife who believed in him so absolutely; who was soon to be a mother!

"We humans are in the hands of powers that we ain't got any more control over than we have over fire and wind!" he thought in wonder and consternation.

In the fear of betraying to Minnie the state of his heart toward another woman, his manner to Irene stiffened and hardened in a way completely to mislead that not very astute young woman, who disguised her chagrin under an air of hauteur.

But Minnie saw none of this by-play. The officiating minister's highly successful efforts at

harrowing the feelings of the bereaved were followed by the yet more sob-provoking number on the programme—the solo by the village soprano:

"Father's gone but not forgotten,
Never will his memory fade.
Sweetest thoughts will ever linger
'Round the grave where he is laid.

"We loved him, yes, we loved him,
But the Saviour loved him more,
So the angels sweetly called him
To that bright and happy shore.

"It was hard to part with Father,
Oh, so sad to see him die.
But then we'll try and meet him
Some sweet day by and by."

The funeral took place on Monday, and it was not until the following Saturday that the Hessville *Weekly* startled the village with the story of the great legacy of thirty thousand dollars left to Doctor Maus by a grateful patient who, after Doctor Maus had cured him by the power of prayer, of cancer, had "up and died of consumption."

And it was not until the big headlines of the Hessville *Weekly* struck Henry Maus in the eyes when on Saturday morning he picked up the newspaper from the counter in his father-in-law's store, that he learned of this wonderful fortune that had come to his father.

In wild excitement he rushed upstairs to Irene.

"Look-a-here! My pop! Thirty thousand dollars yet! *My pop!* And he never peeped about it to nobody!"

But Irene, after the first shock of amazement, was suspicious. "How do you know your pop didn't never peep to nobody about it? Mebby Minnie knowed all about it. Mebby it was even more'n thirty thousand dollars that was inherited to him, and mebby Minnie she worked him to give some to her before he died a'ready. You never went near him when he had sick—you don't know what Minnie mebby done!"

"You don't know our Minnie. She's too damned good to near do a thing like that—cheat me out of my share! Gosh, no! Say!" he cried, quite wild with delight, as he hurriedly began to lace up his shoes to go to see his sister, "mebby I won't have my fling fur oncet! To think of the old man keepin' a secret like that fur two whole months! I'll take a trip to New York!" he fairly yelled.

"Fifteen thousand will be yours," said Irene, her eyes sparkling. "Say!" she cried, "leave us git a Ford!"

"Och, no, a Pierce Arrow or mebby a Simplex and sich a chauffeur fur *you!*" Henry mocked her. "You think I'm a-goin' to spend it all on you, I guess! Well, look-a-here, this here fifteen thousand is *mine*, and I'm a-goin' to spend it on myself! See?"

"What I can see, Hen Maus, is my pop makin' you

pay your board or get out of here!" retorted Irene, furious at her impotence to dominate her own lawful husband either through threats or favours.

"I don't care how soon I get out of Hesswille, oncet I got that there fifteen thousand!" exclaimed Henry. "New York fur mine!"

"A pretty lookin' thing you'd be in New York! You're too ignorant! They'd laugh at you in New York!"

"They won't laugh at a fellah that's got fifteen thousand dollars—in New York or anywheres else!" retorted Henry.

"And when it's all spent on *yourself*, then you'll come crawlin' back here to loaf on us again! Huh!"

"I ain't likely ever *to* come back!" said Henry darkly.

"*When* you come back, you'll have the pleasure of goin' up to your brother-in-law's to beg fur board—you certainly won't get it here!" declared Irene. "And I *see* John Wimmer boardin' a lazy loafer at his expense! He'd sooner duck you in his rain bar'l!"

"Aw, shut your face!" was Henry's loving rejoinder as he flung himself out of the room and out of the house.

A moment later he was running up the street (finding it impossible to restrain his pace to a walk) to get possession, without a moment's loss of time, of his fifteen thousand dollars. Yet even at a running pace he had time to wonder why he had not learned

of this great good fortune before the Hessville *Weekly* had been informed of it. How long had his sister been keeping this news from him? He had had a right to know of it as soon as *she* knew. Why had she not told him? Was she resenting his refusal to aid them when they were in need? Ever since his father's death Henry had been unable to rid himself of the uncomfortable memory of that night when he had denied and cursed his starving old father.

When, without knocking, he opened the front door and walked into his old home, he was impressed almost to a state of awe by the grandeur of the improvements John and Minnie had made. The newly painted exterior of the house, together with the new porch and fence, had transformed the place from the worst to the best home in the village; but the interior was, Henry thought, really above the station even of a schoolmaster. Brussels carpet, plush chairs, sofa cushions, pictures, a victrola! It was gorgeous. Minnie must surely already have possession of her half of the fortune. Then why didn't he have his half?

He passed from the parlour into the dining room.

"This is going some! A reg'lar dining room suit yet! Gosh!" thought Henry, taking in the shining yellow sideboard with chairs and table all matching. "It sure is swell! I never conceited I'd see this old shanty lookin' like this here!"

On the window sill were pots of artificial flowers growing out of artificial earth. On the wall were two

companion pictures of a style of art considered by Hessville appropriate for a dining room—calculated, perhaps, to promote and encourage appetite; one of them, a string of highly coloured fish, their eyes bulging in dying agony; the other, a bunch of limp, dead game.

Henry went on out to the kitchen. New linoleum on the floor, a bright new stove, new modern plumbing!

"Gosh, you're swell up here!" he breathlessly greeted Minnie who was making pie for dinner.

She turned white at his sudden appearing and sank into a chair. "John will be in soon, Henry," she said nervously. "He's up at the school putting some exercises on the blackboard for Monday."

She wished, in her physical weakness, that her husband were at home to shield her in this crisis.

"I kin worry through without John! Why didn't you tell me before of our comin' into all this here money?" he demanded chokingly; he could scarcely speak for excitement. "Why do you leave me learn all about it in the Hesswille *Weekly?* I see how *you* spent enough of it a'ready! Why didn't you leave me know?"

"There was nothing to tell you."

"Nothin' to tell me! Nothin'! As if fifteen thousand dollars fell into my hand every day in the week! What do you mean—nothin' to tell me?"

"Father didn't leave you any money," answered Minnie, white but resolute.

"Ha! You mean he made a will and left you all? Well, I'll *break* it and git my half—see?" cried Henry. "You don't think you kin come a game like that on me, do you?"

"Father didn't make a will because he knew you'd break his will. He gave all he had to me before he died."

Henry stared at her with bulging eyes. "What fur? Why did he? You and John Wimmer in-*floonced* him! Yous *cheated* me! I'll have the law on you! Yous can't keep my half of them thirty thousand! Don't you think it! I'll have yous arrested!"

"There ain't a thing you can do, Henny. Father didn't want for you to have any of this money; so he made it that you couldn't get any. Before he died already, he gave it all over to me. And I put it in bank in my own name."

"So!" gasped Henry, his face apoplectic. "So you'd cheat your own brother out of his rights! You that wants to be so good yet! Your own brother!"

"When did you ever act like a brother to me, Henry? Or like a son to father?"

"Minnie Maus! You ain't a-goin' to try to keep my half away from me, are you?"

"Why should I wish you to have that money sooner'n John and I? You never did a thing for me in all your life. I worked for you for years and years without ever a *thank you* from you. Why shouldn't I sooner give that money to John that's good to me and loves me?"

"Loves you! Much he loves you! Ha!"

"*I* know how much!"

"No, you don't neither! Say, Minnie Maus, do you think Pop would have wanted his cash give to an outsider, preferable to his own son? Heh?"

"John treated him much more as a son should than ever you did, Henny. You never came near him when he was dying!" said Minnie bitterly. "When he went to you hungry—starving!—you cursed him!—and drove him off! His last dying request was that I should never give you any of this money."

Henry, as white as Minnie now, sank into a chair. "Minnie!" he gasped, "ain't you a-goin to gimme *any* of that there money?"

"I'd sooner give it to any stranger on the street than to you. Any stranger would have helped us when we were starving—but you would not!"

"It's John Wimmer has made you so changed! You used to be dead easy before *he* got you so spoilt up! Say! I kin prove it to you that John Wimmer's stuck on *my wife* and that he never was stuck on you! I kin prove it by——"

Minnie laughed involuntarily—almost merrily. "How silly you are, Henny, to think you could make me believe such foolishness!"

Scarcely had she spoken when suddenly she felt John's arm about her pressing her close. He had come in behind her at the kitchen door just in time to hear Henry's assertion and her confident denial of it.

Her faith in his devotion stirred in John an emotion compounded strangely of tenderness, remorse, and satisfaction. Minnie seemed to him in that moment a rod and a staff to comfort him; a very great compensation for the loss of a more supreme happiness.

His sudden appearing seemed to act upon Henry's temper like a torch to powder; to see this man, whom he hated and envied, living complacently in the secure possession of wealth which had belonged to *his* father; which, by all the laws of God and man, ought to be in *his* hands—was too much for his self-restraint. He wanted to fly at him like a mad bull, stamp upon him, crush him to death—and his sense of impotence before John's superior strength fairly maddened him. Only with words could he lash at his enemy and these he used in wild and reckless fury, cursing, abusing, threatening—ending his tirade in a promise of dire vengeance.

"Don't yous two thiefs think I won't git back at yous! I'll burn your fancy house down over your heads!—your house that's rightly *my* house, fur my pop owned it and it was his money that repaired it! Yous listen on me!—your stylish diggin's is goin' up in smoke before yous are many days older!"

"Seeing that it's insured, furniture and all, and that we'd like better to build new, go ahead, Hen," said John.

"Aw, shut up, you——" He used a ribald expression which Minnie, fortunately, did not understand, but which made John turn white.

"Here, here! None of that! Not on my premises!" he commanded peremptorily.

"*Your* premises!" Henry almost screamed. "Yourn! Callin' yourn what belonged to my pop! You——"

He threw out his clenched fist to strike John in the face—but it was caught in mid-air and in an instant Henry found his two hands pinioned behind him.

No sooner did he know himself to be helpless in John's power than all his bravado collapsed and he whimpered with fear.

"You lee' me be! Say! You lee' me go and I won't do you nothin'. I pass my promise I won't. Minnie! You ain't standin' there and leavin' him use me rough, are you?"

Minnie turned anxious, pleading eyes to John. His free hand closed over hers reassuringly. "Go in the other room, Minnie."

"Don't you go!" bawled Henry. "Don't you go and lee' me here alone with him!"

But at the touch of John's hand, the anxious pleading of Minnie's eyes changed instantly to a look of confidence in his fairness, his mercy. She did not want her brother hurt, said her eyes, but it was not necessary to plead for him—John would do what was right. Without a word she turned away and left the room.

"March!" said John to his brother-in-law—and still holding the hands of his captive pinioned behind

him, he turned him right-about-face to the kitchen door and forced him out to the gate.

"If you ever make yourself worth associating with, Hen, you can come back. But not *till* then. Do you understand? Not till then. If I find you round here bothering Minnie, you won't have a pleasant call! Minnie was bothered with you all her life—now I'm going to see to it that she has some peace. So you keep yourself away."

He relaxed his hold; and Henry lost no time in getting out of his reach.

"You——" He repeated his ribald epithet. "I'll have my spite out on you and Minnie if I hang fur it!"

As John walked slowly back into the kitchen, from which came pleasantly the odour of freshly baked pies, he reflected that he could not safely regard Henry's threats as idle. The fellow would certainly try to avenge himself. To minds like Henry's, vengeance for grievances was a sacred duty which only a weakling would forego.

"I got to keep very careful watch—especially till the baby's born already. He might give Minnie a bad fright."

But Minnie, in her faith in John's power to protect her, felt entirely secure—though she knew even more certainly than did John that Henry would never let such a wrong as the loss of a fortune go unavenged if he could help it.

CHAPTER XI

"I NEVER thought to be living on money earned by some other person's hard work," said John one evening as he and Minnie sat chatting together in their cozy sitting room; they had just been reckoning up the very reassuring bank account left over after having paid all their debts; and it must be admitted that a bank balance, even when belonging to idealists, does go a great way toward making a happy home. "We're awfully well-fixed. But I'd sooner it was through work I did than through unearned increments. I'll explain you what they are—unearned increments——"

"I know," smiled Minnie. "It's rents; or interest on money invested; money that comes to you that you didn't work for."

"You're awfully intelligent for a girl," said John approvingly. "I hope the boy takes after you!"

"I'd sooner he'd take after you!"

"If only he don't fool us and take the worst from both of us!"

"You haven't any 'worst' about you!" said Minnie.

"Same to you!" John returned the compliment with a wave of his hand toward her.

"Mebby the boy will fool us both by turning out a girl!" smiled Minnie.

"Only so it's a baby, I'll be more'n satisfied. I can hardly wait till he comes a'ready, Minnie!—if it wasn't for the suffering for you!"

"I, too, can har'ly wait!" she said, ecstatically hugging the baby dress on which she was sewing. "I'm afraid I'll kill her with love!"

"If I see you spoilin' him up with indulgence and humouring, the way you spoiled Hen, I'll have to be awfully firm with him myself."

"*Your* children won't be spoiled, John. No danger."

"About those unearned increments," John heavily reverted to the troublesome doubt in his mind. "You see, Minnie, all wealth, every dollar, stands for *somebody's labour*. There couldn't be wealth without labour to produce it. So there's something awfully wrong somewheres when *we* have the use of fifteen hundred dollars a year that some other ones worked to earn."

"But it's awful comfortable. Never before in my life did I have a penny I didn't work for. I *like* it!"

John laughed. "Yes, it sure is comfortable!" he said as he stretched his long legs out from the big Morris chair in which he lounged. "But," he added seriously, "it ain't ethical."

"Look at the big incomes spent by what they call the idle rich in Philadelphia," said Minnie, "all earned by other ones than those that spend them."

"If I was more educated, I could mebby work out such questions," said John. "I'd have liked to go to college. But it was some fight to get father to leave me go just to Kutztown Normal. And I didn't learn such an awful lot there, either. I learnt more from teaching than ever I learned from going to school. Seneca says," he solemnly quoted, "'Men, while teaching, learn.'"

"Mebby that's what that poet, Robert Browning, meant in that poem you read me one evening—you mind?—called 'Christmas Eve': ''Tis the taught already that profits by teaching.'"

"Mebby," acquiesced John. "And then again mebby not. It's hard to tell sometimes what that poet was driving at! I sometimes think he didn't rightly know himself. I want our children, Minnie, to have all the education they'll take, so's they'll be fitted to give their best service to the world and not be handicapped like I am."

"We'll bring them up to be such Crusaders or knights, you mind of in the history books, John, to fight against things that ain't just or right in the world. Ain't?"

"We will," nodded John gravely. "I'm going to teach them they're here for two things—to be of use and to have a good time. You, Minnie, missed both those things. You never had a good time——"

"I'm making it up now, though!" said Minnie radiantly.

John bent to kiss her lips before going on with his

harangue. "And you never were useful except the year you taught in my school. All your other time you wasted on two idle men. It's a big mistake to think you're being useful and unselfish when you're only making other people selfish. So our children are going to be taught to be more sensible than their mother has been," he concluded, patting her shoulder. "Say, Minnie, didn't it ever bother you any that you gave up your Mennonite faith?"

"No," she shook her head. "Our love is my religion and always will be."

She said it with a simple sincerity that humiliated John almost more than it pleased him, so unworthy of her devotion did he feel himself to be. For though Minnie grew dearer and more necessary to him every day of their life together, he knew, to his sorrow, that his passion for Irene grew in the same proportion. This evening, for instance, in this pleasant domestic intimacy of their hour alone together, the traitorous thought obtruded itself upon his shrinking imagination, "If it was Irene, instead of Minnie, that was sitting here with me—the mistress of my home—about to be the mother of my child——"

He closed his eyes to steady his beating brain before the fancied picture. Irene with her rich, warm bloom, her splendid physique, that proud carriage of her head—every movement of her body a lure, every tone of her voice a thrill!—if it were she that were here at his side—his own!

It chanced that at that very hour the object of

all this romantic idealizing was, like Minnie, enjoying an evening of closest domestic intimacy with her husband.

"Look at here!—and here!—and here!" Henry was violently demanding as he displayed to his coldly indifferent and contemptuous spouse his undarned socks and buttonless underwear, "You lazy, good-for-nothing piece, can't you keep your Mister's clo'es mended up?"

"Mend 'em yourself—you're got more time than I got. What do *you* ever do?"

"If it ain't a wife's place to sew on her Mister's buttons yet and keep his socks darned, what's she *fur* anyhow?"

"Fur? Well, if I wasn't fur somepin better'n keepin' *you* mended up, I wouldn't be fur much, that's sure! I'll *see* myself settin' round sewin' fur you whiles you loaf! Huh!"

"Well, all I got to say, John Wimmer's lucky he didn't git you! Minnie'll anyhow keep his clo'es good mended and his house clean. Look at this here bedroom! You never redd up!"

"Redd up yourself if you like things redd up!"

"*Is* it your Mister's place to redd up the room?"

"What *is* the Mister's work, Hen, in your opinion? I have curiosity to know what you think it is—ha!" Irene laughed derisively from where she lounged in a kimono on the foot of the bed, munching an apple and leafing the pages of a fashion magazine.

"I congratu*late* John Wimmer that he didn't git

you!" Henry repeated tauntingly. "He done grand fur hisself when he jilted you!"

This was going too far. Irene, rising, walked regally to the door, and from that safe vantage hurled at Henry's head first her apple core then her magazine; and before he could recover to dash after her, she had banged the door shut and fled to the safe shelter of her father's presence.

"Pop!" she exclaimed, "it don't make *me* nothing how soon you tell Hen to get out!"

"That suits me!" her father eagerly returned. "Then I tell him right aways! It's only because you wouldn't have it so that I didn't tell him long ago a'ready to get out!"

As Mr. Laub quickly determined to act before his spoiled and petted only child had time to change her mind, Henry suddenly found himself, for the first time in his life, without shelter or food, and forced, therefore, to work—or starve and freeze. Under these circumstances he shook the dust of Hessville from his feet and departed, unlamented, for the city.

What sort of employment he succeeded in securing there Hessville did not hear. John Wimmer fervently hoped it would be permanent; for so long as his resentful brother-in-law remained in the village, he could know no peace in leaving Minnie alone for an hour. It would be so easy for Henry to wreck his vengeance upon her in her present condition. John felt an immense relief, therefore, at the news of Henry's departure.

But he spent hours in reflecting pensively upon the hurt which Irene's proud spirit must have suffered in such a wretchedly mistaken marriage. If he were free, how he would fly to her side to comfort that hurt and help her to woo back her self-respect! It was bitterly hard to have to remain aloof, silent, inexpressive, when all his soul hungered and thirsted to go to her.

Domestic alienations among the Pennsylvania Dutch being so rare as to be counted a deep disgrace, Irene found her situation—neither wife nor widow—most unenviable; so that when Henry, after two months of silence, wrote and told her he had "a good-paying job," and could keep her in style if she would join him, she did not hesitate a moment to respond, in spite of her parents' protest that she ought to demand some details as to this "good-paying job" before committing herself.

"It's easy enough to come back if I find he's lyin'," was her reply. "I have sick of Hesswille anyhow. It ain't so slow in the city. Yous needn't plague me not to go, fur I'm *goin'*. 'Nuff said!"

John's first feeling upon learning that Irene was going to join Henry was one of sheer amazement. To have escaped from such a degrading union and then voluntarily to return to it!—for an instant his ideal of her was dashed. But only for an instant.

"That sacred she holds her wifely dooty!" was his second thought, "even to a skunk like Hen Maus! What a wife she'd have made to a husband that was worthy of her!"

For the hundredth time he tortured his soul to understand what had ever brought her to give herself, in the first place, to such as Henry.

"A queen of a woman stooping to a dog!" he marvelled.

He wished that he might, with safety, go to her and persuade her that it was *not* her duty to cleave to a bad mate; that, on the contrary, she owed it to herself, to her parents and her friends, to break away from a union which must drag her down to the level of the wretch to whom she was bound.

But John could not trust himself to go near her. Therein lay danger to himself, to Minnie, to their unborn child.

For a while after Irene was gone he was wretchedly unhappy; for even an occasional chance glimpse of her on the street had been something to hope for; to delight in.

It was well for the peace of his home and for his wife's happy faith in his supreme love for herself that his keen interest in the baby that was coming, as well as Minnie's precarious state of health forced his mind out of the groove of brooding into which it seemed prone to sink.

The melancholy fact was that Irene's absence was far more calculated to keep alive the flame of his passion than the daily sight of her would have done. Marriage itself would have worked a speedy cure; but her departure, leaving his imagination to play unchallenged with his infatuation, kept his idealized

image of the maiden not only alive, but increasingly dazzling and beautiful. With what might seem strange perversity, he grew into a secret habit, during the few years that passed before he ever again beheld Irene, of transforming her most glaring faults of character and Minnie's finest, rarest qualities into contrasts highly favourable to the imaginary absent one. When Minnie was sweetly yielding, he saw Irene strong and firm; when Minnie was frail from child-bearing, though he cherished her chivalrously and tenderly, yet he beheld Irene a robust mother of stalwart sons; when Minnie was patiently sympathetic with her children's faults and weaknesses, he saw Irene a wiser mother, honoured and worshipped, rather than companioned, by her children.

And yet, he never felt critical toward his wife. He would not have had her different. She would not have been Minnie if she had been big and robust and regal and strong. No, he liked her as she was.

"There's one thing about you, Minnie," he once told her; "if you're a little weak sometimes with them you love—me and the children—you have an awfully strong will over yourself. Your will and your conscience sure do drive you where they want you to go!"

He was sure that a more comfortable wife than Minnie no man ever possessed (Being a Pennsylvania Dutchman he of course thought of his mate as a "possession"). Her only shortcoming was that she was not the love of his impassioned imagination, his burning heart.

Minnie, through it all, remained wholly unsuspicious. John's true state of mind—wedded to one woman and loving and dreaming of another—would have been unthinkable to her utter sincerity and loyalty.

"Ain't, we are happy together, John!" she would say sometimes in the fulness of her heart, when her cup seemed overflowing—perhaps upon discovering that a new baby was coming to them; or in the thrill they both always experienced when finding some new and vital point of mental or spiritual contact; for they alone, in all the village, tried not to stagnate among the practical and material cares of their joint life. They read; they took little jaunts to town to hear lectures or to hear an occasional play; they bought first-class records for their victrola; they subscribed for several good magazines. Hessville considered them almost too superior to be comfortable.

It was when the third baby was expected that there occurred a dramatic variation in the peaceful monotony of their lives. John had gone to Lancaster for a week to attend "Teachers' Institute." As Minnie's "time" was near, he did not like to leave her, but "Teachers' Institute" was a momentous occasion to all "Educators" of the county and could not be slighted except in case of absolute necessity.

"I wish you could go with," he told Minnie. "It would be so much more inter*est*ing to me if I could talk over the speeches with you afterward. Only once in the six years we are married together did you go with. Babies do sure tie a woman down. Ain't?"

"But they're more than worth all they cost!" laughed Minnie. "To be sure I wish, too, I could go with. That one time I did go along, I liked it near as well as a theatre yet! Some of the speakers were grand! I think, John, if you could make a speech and give *your* ideas of teaching and managing a school, it would be useful to the audience to hear it, for you have better thoughts than some that speak."

"I know I have. Some of the speakers say such awfully dumb things!—things that every teacher of any experience in the audience knows ain't so. Sometimes I want to stand up and holler, 'You're either a nut or either a damned liar!' Or to some I would like to yell, 'Quit killin' time—ours and yours—and *say* something!' But I'm not educated enough to speak in public. And I'm not a Prominent Educator enough to be *asked* to tell my opinions on Education."

"It will be a long week," sighed Minnie, "with you away. But I'm glad you're having the change. And your letters will be *my* change and treat. If you didn't go off, I wouldn't get letters."

"It always clears up my own ideas, Minnie, to talk them out to you; so I'll miss not having you along. And not seeing the kiddies for a whole week! Gosh!"

"Yes, ain't! It draws my breath!"

John left on Monday morning, after having first arranged with one of his pupils, Eva Hertzogg, a reliable little girl of fourteen, to call every morning and evening at his home during his absence, to do chores for Minnie, run errands, and bring the mail.

The mail would of course consist of his daily letter to Minnie; nothing else, for they had no correspondents and none of the periodicals for which they subscribed was due at this time.

Minnie was, then, surprised when on Monday evening, a half day after John's departure, Eva Hertzogg brought her a letter from the postoffice.

"Why, I didn't look for a letter till to-morrow morning yet! I don't see how it could get here that quick," she said as she eagerly took it from the little girl.

"It can't be from Mister," Eva pointed out, "for the reason that its postmark is Hesswille."

"And it ain't his penmanship, either," added Minnie wonderingly. "It's awful poor penmanship!"

She opened the letter quickly, a vague fear in her heart of impending trouble.

"Who's it from?" asked Eva curiously, running around to Minnie's side and looking over her shoulder. "Why, it ain't signed, is it?"

Minnie started to read it aloud, but changed her mind after a few words and sent the curious and very reluctant Eva home.

Then she reopened and read slowly and carefully this appalling communication which the mail had brought to her:

Minnie Wimmer You put $100 in a enwelope and stick it under the shutter of the window on your south porch, on Toosday at nine p m in the evning. Or before morning your firstborned will be stole from you. If you tell this

here to any one, your husband will never come back to you alive, If you send for him he won't get your message. If you try to go to him, yule be stopped. Obay this here letter and none of yous will be harmed. Fale to obay it in everey partikler and yule be sorry for the rest part of your life.

"This is Henny!" she instantly concluded. "He knew John would be away this week to Teachers' Institute!"

In her physical plight and with the two young children on her hands, her helplessness to cope with the situation alarmed her.

"If I didn't look so, I'd take the babies and go straight to Lancaster to John," she thought.

Since that was impossible, what should she do?

If she appealed to her neighbours to protect her, the threat of harm to John might be executed; and as for an appeal to the law, Hessville's police force consisted of one feeble little constable. If she telegraphed to John to come home, her message would perhaps be intercepted.

Perhaps the only thing she could do was to hand over the hundred dollars.

"I always knew Henny would some day try to have revenge for that money," she thought. "And if I don't give him the hundred dollars, he will certainly do what he says in this letter!"

But she knew John would consider such a yielding to threat as inexcusably cowardly and a very weak conniving with wickedness.

"And anyhow, whoever it is that wrote off this letter (if it *ain't* Henny) why, if I gave him the money, it would only encourage him to come another time and demand more," she decided.

If Henry was not the author of the letter, it must be someone who knew her well. "To so understand just what would frighten me into giving him the money! For to be sure I'd do most anything before I'd leave my child be stolen from me!"

The more she considered the situation, the more frightened she became.

"If only I could ask someone's advice!"

But that would endanger John—if there were anything *in* the threats of the letter. She had no doubt of John's ability to defend himself if forewarned. But with cowards who stabbed in the back!

Finally, after long consideration, she concluded that the only thing she could do would be to take at least one person into her confidence; to send a man or boy to Lancaster at once to deliver into John's own hands the anonymous letter. John would know exactly the right thing to do about it.

The question was whom should she send? The man of the house next door would, she knew, be a willing messenger, but he drank and could not be trusted to hold his tongue or even to deliver the letter.

There was Eva Hertzogg's brother Peter, seventeen years old, who attended John's school—he was a level-headed lad; and he would be delighted to have a trip to the city, all expenses paid.

She would, however, have to act very cautiously. If Peter were seen by the anonymous letter-writer, coming to her house, it might arouse a suspicion of her plan.

When Eva arrived next morning, per schedule, to inquire what provisions Mrs. Wimmer wanted from the store, Minnie was ready with a list that would keep the family supplied with food for a month.

"It'll be too heavy for you to carry, Eva, so get your brother Peter to come right up here with the things as fast as he otherwise can! I *got* to have that peck of potatoes right aways."

"But, Missus, you're got potatoes a-plenty in your cellar! A bar'l full anyhow!"

"I don't like mine—I have hungry for the nice ones they're got at Laub's store. Tell Peter to *hurry* with the potatoes, Eva! I got to have them till twenty minutes a'ready."

Eva, as she obeyed, decided that here was a proof of what she had heard of the cranky notions women got when they were pregnant.

"To be that fussy about such common things as potatoes yet!—that you even *let* your bar'l full and go and buy other ones! Don't it beat all!"

"Better hurry, Peter, with them potatoes she's cravin', or she'll throw a fit!" Eva advised her brother. "I bet you she'll pitch in and eat one of them Laub's store potatoes *raw*, as soon as she can get her hand on 'em!"

But when Peter arrived, breathless, with his

heavy load, Minnie manifested no interest whatever in the potatoes.

"Peter, you must go to Lancaster for me on the nine-thirty train," she announced to the astonished boy as she put a dollar bill into his hand, "and find Mister at Teachers' Institute and deliver him this note"—putting into his hand the anonymous letter sealed in a fresh envelope and addressed to John. "You know Teachers' Institute is held at the Court House. *Don't leave any one see the note!* And don't give it to any one but John. He'll come on home with you."

"Ain't you feelin' so well, Missus, that you must send for Mister over?"

"Oh, I'm feelin' just so middlin'. But—but I got to have Mister home right aways. Will you go?"

"Sure, Missus, if Mom'll leave me."

"But, Peter, I don't want any one to know I'm sending for Mister—not even your mother."

"But Mom won't know where I'm at! She'll be worried and have cross at me!"

"You'll be back by one o'clock. Eva's coming back for an hour this morning to help me and I'll explain to her. You go right to the depot from here, Peter, without going home first; and you dare keep the change from the dollar."

"Och, thank you, Missus, but that's most too much pay! It's only fifty cents round trip to Lancaster."

"You can keep the change."

"Thank you kindly. But I ought anyhow to put on my Sunday suit to go to town yet!"

"You haven't time!" cried Minnie desperately.

"Don't you want fur our Evy to fetch Mom and the doctor whiles I'm goin' fur Mister?" asked Peter, blushing but well-meaning.

"Och, no, Peter! I tell you I don't want a living soul to know you are going for Mister!"

"All right then, Missus," said Peter soothingly, thinking that such extreme "modesty" as would conceal from her neighbours the imminent necessity for summoning "Mister" was even crankier than a craving for "store potatoes." "I'll start right aways," he agreed.

CHAPTER XII

"OF COURSE it's Hen," John agreed with Minnie when, upon his return at one o'clock, they talked it over, while he ate the hot dinner she placed before him. "Do you know his penmanship when you see it, Minnie?"

"No—for the reason that he never wrote anything—though to be sure, Henny *can* write. This letter could be his penmanship, for all I know."

"Nobody else could be writing you such a letter. It sounds like Hen!"

"I was so sorry to call you home!" said Minnie regretfully, though the weight of the universe seemed to have rolled from her heart in knowing her children to be once more under their father's sure protection. "You can go right back to-morrow, John."

"You did the right thing to get me here. When I think of you and the babies at Hen's mercy!—with me away! Well, I ain't letting you alone again, Minnie. I'll get Mother or one of the girls to come and stay with you."

"Would your father spare one of them?"

"He'll have to. Of course he'll kick! Gosh, how he hates me!" added John a little sadly. "It must

be great, Minnie, to have a father you can respect and be fond of!"

"*Your* children have that kind of a father!"

"A man's children *ought* to keep him to the mark—ain't? I'd hate for my children not to be able to respect me."

"That's one grief you'll never know, John, dear!"

"No telling, Minnie—a man's got temptations that an innocent girl like you couldn't understand—and better men than me have yielded to them."

At half-past eight that evening, Minnie, acting under John's directions, stepped out of the house, went to the southern end of the porch, tucked a sealed envelope containing a sheet of blank paper under the shutter, and returned to the house.

"Of course he won't come for it if he saw me come home," said John. "But if he didn't know you sent Peter for me, I guess he wasn't watchin' for me to come."

He wrapped himself in a big coat and under cover of the darkness stole out to the thick evergreen hedge at the south side to the house and lay down to wait for the villain.

About nine o'clock he heard slow footsteps approaching along the silent, empty street. They did not, however, turn in at his gate, but passed on. He lay very still and waited. In a few moments he heard the footsteps reapproaching—slowly and a little cautiously—from the other direction. Again as they neared his gate they did not turn in, but

passed by and moved on, even out of earshot. And again John waited. Presently he heard them—the same slow, cautious steps—returning. He propped his head on his hand and peered through the dimness to try to see who it was that was so patiently patrolling his house. He descried the slim figure of a young boy—certainly not Henry's burly, clumsy frame. John held his breath as the youth once more approached the gate, more slowly than before. He paused now, for a moment—then entered. Going noiselessly to the south side of the house, he stepped upon the porch and tiptoed to the window. The white envelope showed plainly against the dark green shutter. Drawing it from its nook, he turned hastily to step off the porch—only to find himself caught and held in the unescapable grip of big John Wimmer.

"Who are you, boy? Why, bless me—Carl Eichler! What are you up to?"

"A man's givin' me a dollar to fetch him this here letter," explained Carl cheerfully.

"But what's the letter about? Why all this sneaking, Carl?"

"He says he's your sister's beau that your ol' man won't leave hang round his place, so she writes him off sich love letters and lets 'em here fur him."

"That's his story, is it? Who is he—do you know?"

"No, he's a stranger to Hesswille. A foreigner from New York."

"Look here, Carl! Why didn't you walk up to the porch and get the letter without so much caution and pussy-footing?"

"The man tol' me not to get the letter if I seen any one round. I guess he had afraid your ol' man was watchin'. Say, Teacher!" Carl suddenly exclaimed, scenting a mystery in this errand relegated to him, "what's it all about, anyhow?"

His innocence was so transparent that John, knowing the simplicity of the lad, who was one of his pupils, could not doubt his sincerity.

"Come on in the house with me, Carl."

"But the man's waitin' fur me, Teacher, with that there dollar—I got to hurry."

"He'll be more likely to give you a kick than a dollar when he sees the contents of that enwelope. Come in."

He led the way to the lighted sitting room where Minnie, having just put her two children to bed, was seated with her sewing—though she was far too anxious to be able to work at it. She greeted their entrance with a start of apprehension, which turned to astonishment as she saw, not her brother, but young Carl Eichler.

"Now, then, Carl, how did this stranger get hold of you?" asked John.

"He talked to me over our back fence and ast me would I do him this favour fur a dollar. Say, who is he, anyhow?"

It was six years since Henry had left Hessville

and the boy could easily have forgotten him entirely.

"What does he look like?" asked John.

"He's a thick-built fellah with a black beard."

"Where is he waiting for you?"

"Down back of Laub's store. Say, what's it all about, anyhow?"

"Come, I'll go with you. We'll take him his letter."

John bent to kiss Minnie. "Don't worry, dear."

"I'll be glad when you're safe home again! I can't help being afraid——" her lips shook and she bent over her sewing.

John smoothed her hair. "I'll hurry right back, dear."

When he and the boy were about half way to Laub's store he bade Carl go on ahead. "I'll follow slower," he said. "I'm going to nab the scamp that put you up to doing his dirty work for him!"

Carl turned into the lane back of Laub's store. A few steps and he came upon the sombre figure of a man skulking close to a fence, his gait and his whole bearing betraying such nervous apprehension that the boy shrank from approaching him. But the man had heard him coming and sprang forward eagerly, almost savagely, to snatch for the envelope.

Carl, however, held it out of his reach. "My dollar first!" he demanded.

"Gimme the letter first!" cried the man in a coarse, husky voice,

"No, siree—my dollar before you git your letter!"

"But your dollar's in the letter, kid! Gimme——"

"Then I'll help myself," said Carl, tearing open the envelope.

But the man leapt upon him and snatched it. "Now you don't git nothin'—fur bein' so fresh! See?"

He sprang away into the darkness—right into the arms of John Wimmer.

"Leave us see who you are," said John, wheeling the fellow about so that the distant light from Mrs. Laub's kitchen fell upon his face. "Ah, I thought so! Hen Maus! Well, Hen, if I believed in jails, you'd get locked up for that letter you sent your sister!"

"I didn't send her no letter! You can't prove it! You lee' me go!"

"I can prove it by your handwriting," said John at a venture.

"That's where I ketch you lyin', fur it ain't my writin'! I didn't write it!" Henry stoutly maintained.

"It? What?"

"The letter!"

"Who did you get to write it for you?"

"It's none of your damned business who I got! I didn't git nobody! That there letter Minnie got was wrote to her by *my wife*. I don' know what was in it. Irene she ast me to fetch her the answer along."

"You don't know what was in the letter Minnie received?"

"No, I don't! You lee' me go!"

"But you tol' Carl Eichler the letter had his dollar in it."

"Well, anyhow, you lee' me go, John Wimmer!"

"Listen to me!" commanded John. "If ever again you bother Minnie, I'll put you where you can't! Even if I don't uphold to jails, I'd sooner see you jailed than have Minnie frightened and bothered. You know me, Hen Maus. You know you can't fool with me. So you take care and heed what I tell you! If you try this kind of thing again, you'll get *yours!*"

"Lee' me go if you're through your jawin'!"

"Another thing—don't you dare to try and mix *Irene* up in your dirty acts!"

"What's Irene got to do with you? You mind to your own business!"

"Tell me—where is your—where is Irene?" stammered John, his hunger for news of his secret divinity overcoming even his dislike of this source of it. "Do you know where she is?"

"It ain't none of your damned business where my wife is!"

"Look here, you answer my question—or by God, I'll make you! *Where is Irene!*"

"You!" sneered Henry. "You that wants to be so much, turnin' red and white about *my wife!* Gosh, I wisht Minnie could hear you now—with your, '*Where is Irene?*' What's it *to* you, heh?"

"Answer me—where is she?"

"*Wouldn't* you like to know? Oho!"

John, suddenly realizing the futility of his questioning; knowing that whatever Henry might answer, he could not be sure that it was the truth, released his hold upon him so unexpectedly that they both staggered and Henry fell to the pavement.

"Remember what I've said to you!" John delivered a parting warning as Henry gathered himself together to rise. "Annoy your sister again at your peril!"

He turned away to go back to his home.

But he felt, as he walked up the street, that he must not enter Minnie's presence until he had recovered from the agitating effect of those painful references to Irene.

"I got to walk it off," he told himself. "I'll walk till I've got myself in hand once."

So shaken was he that he did not hear, presently, a stealthy step behind him. But when, just before reaching his own gate, he turned to walk back again, he saw the figure of a man, a short distance ahead of him, also turn abruptly—then quickly disappear into the darkness.

"Was that Hen following me?" he wondered. "I didn't hear him!"

He ran down the street peering into the side lanes; but he found no one.

"I'm so upset, I'm seeing things! Hen wouldn't be following me—he was only too glad to escape me!"

But his little run after the dark, disappearing

figure had dulled his quivering nerves and he felt that he could now safely venture to face Minnie. So sure he was that the retreating figure was only imagined or a shadow that as he walked quickly home he never once looked behind him. It was not until he put his foot on his own porch that he heard a sudden scuffling noise at his side. Wheeling about quickly, he heard a pistol shot startlingly close to him. Before he could see who had fired it, there was another shot—and he fell—face downward.

But it was not the pistol shots which roused the heavily sleeping villagers, but a woman's piercing shriek—followed by a blood-curdling silence.

CHAPTER XIII

MY GOODNESS, John, you workin' at this time of night! Why, it's near nine o'clock!" exclaimed Jennie Wimmer as she entered her brother's cluttered kitchen one evening, a month after that fatal week of the Teachers' Institute. "It does take a man long to get through all—ain't it does? Here! You set a while and leave me finish redding up—you look wore out!"

"I'm just hog enough to take you at your word, Jennie, and leave you do it," returned John, throwing down the pan he was cleaning at the sink and casting himself exhausted upon the settee, while Jennie, removing her wraps and rolling up her sleeves, capably tackled the wild disorder of the kitchen.

Her snapping black eyes, neatly arranged black hair, and slim, strong figure, all seemed to judge, condemn, and challenge the dirt and disorder of the room. John heaved a long sigh of relief as he abandoned to her the battle with the chaos of the place. It had beaten him completely.

"My, but a man is a dopple when it comes to housework!" Jennie talked as she worked. "You're as helpless as your two babies, John! How are they, anyhow?"

"They're well, but they fret for their mother, poor kiddies!—more and more every day!" answered John from the settee, speaking in a dull, hopeless tone that made his sister's snapping eyes soften with sympathy. "I had an awful time getting them to sleep to-night!"

"And you yourself only a week out of the hospital yet! You ain't fit to be worried like this! If only you could get a housekeeper!"

"Yes, if only a body could! But there ain't any to be had, whether or no!" said John. "If it wasn't for the neighbours being so good about keeping the children whilst I'm at school, I'd have to *let* my teaching."

"If only Pop would leave one of us girls come and stay!" sighed Jennie. "It's awful to think of you having to come home from your school every day and do housework and keep care of the children! But Pop he won't spare any of us."

"It goes without saying that he won't put himself out any," said John heavily.

"I'd of got here sooner this evening," said Jennie, "but Pop he watches us so, to keep us at home! Goodness knows what he'll say when he knows I got away!"

"I wonder what he gets out of it—being so mean and so tyrannical!" said John thoughtfully. "Now that I know what a father's feelings are—and a husband's," he added huskily, "I'm more puzzled than ever over Pop!"

"And when you think what Mom's had to put up with all her married life!" said Jennie.

"Why does a woman want to get married anyhow," cried John passionately, "when all she gets out of it is sacrifice and sickness and work! Look at poor little Minnie! From the day our first baby was born, she never knew a free hour! And then—when I think," he faltered, "of the price she had to pay for that last baby—and it *dead* yet!"

"Ain't it fierce!" said Jennie in tender sympathy. She longed to go and put her arms about her stricken brother, to comfort him with caresses and petting such as one would give to a hurt child. But the Pennsylvania Dutch are not given to demonstrations of affection and she could more easily have gone to the stake. "Minnie was always as happy, though, John, as a woman can be," she said softly, as she hung up her dishcloth and began to put the dishes away.

"*Why* was she?" demanded John bitterly. "What did I give her in return for all she gave me?"

"Love! You gev her love!" said Jennie, blushing. "And it kep' her satisfied and happy. I never knowed a happier woman than Minnie. Just because she had a good man to love her. You kin take it from me, John, that women are just sich nuts!"

John's eyelids were lowered and he did not answer. His heart was sick with its secret sense of deep disloyalty.

But after a few moments he spoke: "I know, Jen, that I anyhow gave her *companionship.* I know it from my own lonesomeness since she's gone. I'm so lonesome I think I can't stand it! To come into this empty house!"

"Och, ain't!" cried Jennie.

Again they were silent for a while, Jennie working busily and John lying very still, his eyes closed, his face white and drawn.

"Did you hear, John, that Irene Maus is home?" Jennie presently asked as she began to pick up and sort out the medley of toys, clothes, books, and sundry other things strewn about the floor and chairs.

John was thankful that her back was turned toward him as she spoke, so that she did not see the violent start her announcement gave him.

"She's wearin' such a crape wail," Jennie continued, "fur Hen—fur all, I bet you she was only too glad he got kilt before the cops caught him! She acts awful gay and jolly! Just think of wearing a crape wail and then not acting to look *according!* But Irene always was a flighty piece!"

"How's her father?" asked John faintly, his hand over his eyes.

"They ain't got no hopes fur him. Mrs. Laub's giving up the store—it takes all her time to tend Mister, she says, since he has his stroke. And Irene she says she never did tend the store and she ain't beginnin' now. But Mrs. Laub'll have barely

enough to live on if they give up the store, and folks is wonderin' how Irene will support herself—and her so much for dressin' and a sporty time. Well, John, I guess I'll have to be goin' now or Pop'll be missing me and come after me—and I certainly wouldn't enjoy his comp'ny home!"

"I certainly am much obliged to you for helping me out, Jen! I'll go and hitch up my horse and buggy and you can drive yourself home. You must not walk those two miles—it's after ten o'clock," said John, rising from the settee.

"But, John, if Pop seen your horse and buggy in the stable to-morrow, he'd know *why* they was there—and then I'd ketch it!"

"I'd drive you home and bring the team back, but I'm afraid to let the children alone here—they're so restless and wakish. They get awake and cry for—for their mother!"

"Them poor little things! But I ain't afraid to walk home alone, John."

"I won't leave you do it. Not if I have to wake the children and take them with. I'll ask Peter Hertzogg to drive out with you and bring the buggy back. You stay here with the children till I go get Peter."

Jennie, while she waited, thought wistfully of the happy married life Minnie must have had with a man who was always so considerate of a woman as John was.

"Yet *he* don't see what he gev her in return fur all

she gev him! Ain't men dumb, though! Why, it must have been enough happiness for her just seein' how awful dependent on her he was. At every turn he misses her!"

Later that evening, as Jennie, alone in her bedroom at home, was undressing for the night, her mother cautiously slipped from her bed, at the side of her sleeping spouse, and joined her daughter, to hear the latest report from the bereaved household of her son.

"It ain't only Minnie's good housekeepin' that our John misses, Mom," said the girl sadly. "I see every day how he misses not havin' her to *talk* to. So often when I'm down there workin', he'll start tellin' me his thoughts about something—and then pull up short when he remembers that I ain't so nice educated like what Minnie always was, and that I can't take in his deep conwersation. Dear goodness, Mom, but Minnie and our John did have fond for each other!"

"Well, to be sure, Jennie," responded John's mother unenthusiastically, "it's understood that a man and his wife *likes* one another! That's *understood*."

"There's lots of things I could *sooner* understand!" retorted Jennie, "judgin' by most marriages I seen a'ready. I could sooner understand how being tied to a person by law would make you hate 'em like the devil! But our John—a woman could like *him* even if she was married to him."

"How you talk, Jennie!—'*even* if she was married

to him!' Somepin'll mebby happen you if you sneer so at God's plans!"

"Was it God's plans, *do* you think, to bring such trouble to John? I think it was Hen Maus's!" said Jennie flippantly.

"Jennie! It takes my breath when you speak so onreligious—it squeezes me! I can't get it over myself!"

"Och, Mom!" Jennie laughed involuntarily. "You're talkin' awful Dutch! You're all up-mixed! Yes," she sighed, "this here Pennsylwania Dutch does make a body get their words all through-other! Ain't? Even our John yet, a little sometimes gets his words up-mixed!"

"I never took notice that he did. I think Johnny talks awful pretty!" his mother defended him from any least criticism.

The practical difficulties of John's present situation helped to dull somewhat the pain of his sorrow.

"I know now," he would think while wrestling with the cleaning of the house, the children's baths, the laundry work, the cooking, "why women are turning Suffragists and wanting *men's* jobs! And *these* rotten jobs," surveying his disordered house, "are the things Minnie's had to do every day since we are married! Why didn't she go crazy? She with her fondness for reading and the things of the mind! It makes me feel as dumb as an ox, this kind of work does! But Minnie was always that bright and intelligent! And never once since we're married did I see her not looking happy! Even when she was

suffering the awful pain of child birth! Gosh! Why was she so contented?"

He put from his mind the unbearable explanation Jennie had offered—"You gev her love." Only his own heart knew the bitterness that lurked for him in those words. Minnie had been *cheated!* She had been given false coin—the "love" that had made her so happy had been counterfeit!

Much as he hated the housework he had to do, it was his salvation from reflections that would have maddened him.

"Drudgery! That's what housework is, drudgery!" he would growl as he violently swept a room with all the doors and windows tightly closed, wondering, the while, why Minnie had never choked to death in the process, as he was doing.

He realized how marvellously she must have managed her housework to have spared him so entirely from ever feeling its machinery. He had known only its comforts.

"I see now how many ways I could have helped to make it easier for her," he thought with wild regret.

He learned, also, when he saw how the weekly grocery bills mounted under his régime, what an economical "provider" Minnie had been. "One less to eat, yet it's costin' twice as much! How did she do it? We didn't have hash *every* day!"

It must be said to John's credit that, greatly as he missed the physical well-being which Minnie's management of their home had given him, he missed yet

more the companionship that he now knew, as he had never fully known before, had meant more to him than anything else he had ever possessed—more than his home, his children, his work. Without her he had no outlet, no expression of himself whatever. He felt spiritually suffocated. His longing to talk to her seemed at times an unendurable obsession.

"If I'd never had her, I wouldn't feel so darned lonesome!" he would sigh as he paced the floor in his desolated home.

Having failed to find a hired housekeeper in or near Hessville, he had advertised for one in a daily paper of Lancaster. But the answers he had received had been disheartening.

FRIEND:

You request a housekeeper. Leave me be your housekeeper. I have a grammar school education and intelligent. Please inform me by return mail without fail as to my privileges. Hoping this will meet your approval.

Yours respectfully,

MYRTIE AUKAMP.

UNKNOWNED FRIEND:

Until this evening I never heard of you. But in this evening's *Era* I seen an Ad. Wanted a housekeeper. Wanted for a gentleman. Wanted to help keep care of two children. I thought that will just suit me. Now if I suit you I will come to see you, and you see me, and if all is Agreeable, I will come. I have no incumbrance. I am well. No disease. I have took care of invalids, so know I can suit. I am of an elderly age.

GRACETTA STEINKOMPH.

DEAR SIR:

I think I am qualified to fill the position or I would not have applied. If this proves satisfactory I will take the position.

Yours truly,
CALLIE BOLTZ.

FRIEND:

I can give A No. 1. references in regards to my personality and filling my last place of employment. If you can do same, we can suit each other.

Yours trueley,
ELLIE BOMBERGER.

DEAR FRIEND:

I will come to be your housekeeper, for I like the way your Add reads. It is interesting and fatherly. Your Add tells me you are very nice and I hope I am not mistaking. Please kindly don't through this in wiast basket without opening it.

Your friend,
LIZZIE CRAMP.

MISTER:

I seen your Ad and think I can come to your wish, as I am very refined and kind, if you will give me a trile.

Your Well-Wisher,
EMMA DIEFENDERFER.

DEAR MISTER:

I live all alone and live a lonely life, so need a companion myself and will be glad to come and live at your place for to be companionable and friendly to a Gentleman.

Your true Frend,
NAOMI EBY.

DEAR GENTLEMAN:

Nicely educated and of a refined disposition and pleasing personality. Will be pleased to hear from you.

Yours Sinsear,

RUTHY GAUGLER.

DEAR SIR:

Seeing your Ad, I decided to accept the offer. I need a place somewhat to this effect. The position you offer me seems favourable to me. Will come at once. I only want something whereby my need can be met by your need or I should say another's need. Would also say I am a Protestant. I know all about caring for children. I have a cheery disposition, gentle manners and a very willing heart and try to make life bright for all. I am very refined, agreeable and optimistic. So I feel sure I can fill the bill on agreeable manners and education. Now what else do you require? I was housekeeper to one Gent till God called him Home. Ten years we were companions and his nurse when ill. Then another almost two years when he also was called away by death. We loved each other. I always like to do to others as I would have others do to me. If you are already suited, hope there will be no hard feelings. And trust my rival will be good, kind, trustworthy and optimistic as a Christian Lady should and ought.

Your humble correspondent,

MISS MAMIE GROSCH.

DEAR EMPLOYER:

Now I have a nice sister and has some high school course. She lives in country so therefore has nice manners and is nice. She would be no Girl to run around. If you

can give satisfactory References as to your moral character, you can get my sister. She's a nice Girl. Was raised in a nice home.

Yours truly,

MAE KIMMICH.

KIND GENT IN REGARDS TO YOUR AD:

I am a lady of a Kind and also a Christian. Belong to church. I lived with a former Gent and done all his writing and that was *some*, for he had five out-of-town children and they must each have their letters every week, one or two. Please send me an acceptable answer. If you want to see me personal, you can call. If reference is desired, same will be cheerfully furnished. Trusting you will consider same favourably,

Remain Sinsere,

FLOSSIE HALFPOP.

DEAR FRIEND:

Now if I loved the work I am at, I would not be writing this. But it is quite tiresome. I could not be expected to love it. You would not yourself. I desire to change my vocation. I don't know if you will understand, but *I* prefer to work for love preferable to money. It isn't salary I look to. I want to make some lonely gentleman feel less lonesome. This may sound as if I was prating about my virtues. But I assure you I have no such intention, even if I do have virtues to prate about. It has always been my One Desire to be a companion to some one who would appreciate me and now at last I am about to realize this long-cherished Hope. I do not keep Company. Kindly leave me hear of you and oblige

MISS AMYE DAMBACK.

"Poor Miss Damback's long-cherished hope is doomed to remain unrealized some longer!" had been John's mental comment on this communication.

DEAR GENTLEMAN:

If its a cancer case to nurse I tell you right now I won't nurse it, for I got stung once when I went to housekeep and never again! So if it ain't, will ask you to consider me an applicant please answer at once and tell me more of your request. I have a kind disposition. Am a woman of uncertain age and have been thinking of doing something of that sort.

Your Kind frend,
MRS. CHARITY LOVE.

There was one letter that said nothing except that the writer hoped to be with him in the near future and referred him to "our Fire Chief, Sam Kindler."

"A fire chief named Kindler!" John grinned.

He felt utterly discouraged and hopeless over this assortment of applicants. "There ain't one among them all that don't sound dippy!"

One of the hardest trials of his present situation was the daily necessity of leaving his two children, Jacky and Sophie, to the care of neighbours while he was at school. He early realized that however kindly disposed his neighbours might be, they did not seem to understand his children.

"Were they good for you to-day, Mrs. Yutzy?" he would inquire when, after school, he would call to "collect" them.

"Well, I guess it's my dooty to tell you, Mister," Mrs. Yutzy one day replied to this question, while six-year-old Jacky and four-year-old Sophie rushed frantically to be gathered into their father's arms, "that Jacky and Sophie both sweared somepin awful this after!"

"Why, I never heard them do that!" exclaimed John, surprised and interested in this new development, but not so shocked as Mrs. Yutzy thought he should have been. "Where on earth did they ever hear any swearing? What did they say?"

"Well, Sophie she wanted to play Sunday school," explained Mrs. Yutzy, "and she sayed to Jacky, 'I'm the teacher. Come here, scholard.' But Jacky he had tied his hands behind him and pinned a table cover on him like a shawl and he was layin' on the floor with his head under a chair—and he answered her, 'I can't be a scholard—I'm the mother of Jesus.' And Sophie she sayed, 'Mother of Jesus, come *here*.' But Jacky he says, 'Och, Sophie, the Mother of Jesus can't be your scholard. The bad men have put me in prison all tied up, till they get Jesus hanged a'ready. They're afraid I might stop 'em.' 'Yi, yi,' I tol' him, 'you darsent play about Jesus like that there! I'll tell your pop!' I sayed. And Sophie she sayed, 'But I speaked polite about Him.' And then after bit, when she wanted fur to dress herself up like a pictur in a fashion paper that she seen, with sich a awful low-neck frock, Jacky he says to her, 'No one but Jesus' mother has the dare to

wear sich a low-neck frock like what *that* is!' Och, Mister, it freezed my blood, the light way Jacky talked about sich sa-kerd things! And when after while I was rockin' Sophie to sleep and singin' to her, 'I have a Father in the Promised Land,' she says, '*I* haven't. My fader's here.' I thought I'd ought to tell you, Mister, so's you could learn 'em better than to be so light-minded about religion."

Heavy-hearted though John was, he had to turn away to conceal a smile at the idea of his two babies being "light-minded about religion."

"To be sure," sighed Mrs. Yutzy, "they're not got their mother, now, to teach 'em what's right."

"Fader," Jacky here interrupted, "when Jesus dot alive after the bad men killed Him, did they kill Him aden? Or did they think it was no dood?"

John's eyes invited Mrs. Yutzy's admiration of this precocious intelligence which, at such a tender age, asked such thoughtful questions. "You see how that boy thinks!" he pointed out with fatherly pride.

"Yes, ain't it awful!" said Mrs. Yutzy disapprovingly. "You got to break him of the habit, Mister."

John laughed as he turned to answer his boy's question. "I'll explain you all about it when we get home, Jacky," he said as he began to put on the children's overshoes and coats.

"I telled Mrs. Yutzy," Jacky said conversationally, "she mustn't say, 'You bet!' It ain't polite to. Muvver said it ain't. *Is* it, Fader?"

Before John, colouring with embarrassment, could answer this awkward question, Sophie spoke in. "And Mrs. 'Ootzy she teeps her 'poon in her tup. She hadn't ought to—Muvver said so."

"She don't know any better," said Jacky compassionately. "*She* never went to Kutztown Normal like my Fader did, to det teached. *Did* you, Mrs. Yutzy?"

As John walked across the lot from his neighbour's home to his own, a child perched on each shoulder, he thought despairingly of the drudgery awaiting him—beds to make, the breakfast dishes to wash, supper to cook, the kitchen to "redd up," the children to wash and put to bed.

"And I'm dog-tired!" he sighed. He had had a hard day at school.

He thought how different his coming home from school used to be—a clean, orderly house, a warm, bright sitting room (unlike the rest of Hessville, John and his wife had never used their kitchen as a living room), a prettily dressed, radiant young wife, and two clean and fascinating children eager for his return; the savoury odours of a good supper coming from the kitchen; after supper a romp with "the kiddies," while Minnie "did" the dishes; then a story to quiet down the excited, bright-eyed children—after which he and Minnie together would carry their precious babies upstairs and put them to bed. Then a good, long, quiet evening alone with Minnie in their sitting room, talking and reading.

Minnie always had a lot of funny things to repeat to him that the children had said during the day; he always had school anecdotes to relate to her. What a help she had always been to him when he was perplexed over some question of government or pedagogy! Oh, that had been the life! Did ever mortal man have such a paragon of a wife? Ah, had that, perhaps, been the trouble? If she had been a little selfish sometimes, had exacted more from him for herself, more leisure, more freedom, more money; if he had had to serve her more instead of being served so perfectly (even their financial security came from her)—wouldn't he have valued her more highly? Had she made herself too cheap to him? Was that why he had never been able, in all his comfort, contentment, and even happiness, to forget Irene? Even yet—stricken as he was—the thought of Irene was never far away from his heart.

He deposited the children on the step of the back porch, opened the kitchen door, and took them in.

"Hello! Your Aunt Jennie must have been here!" he exclaimed as he saw at once, with deep relief, that the disorder of the morning was all cleared away and that a supper was cooking on the stove. "Gee! Ain't this fine and dandy! All the work done and a hot supper cooking!"

Little Jacky's face turned suddenly white. "Mebbe Muvver's comed home!" he said breathlessly.

John pressed the boy to his side. "No, Jacky, not that—not that!"

The door into the sitting room suddenly opened and little Sophie, running forward to greet her aunt, stopped short and shrank back shyly against her father at sight of the strange lady in black that stood in the doorway.

"Hello, John!" exclaimed the strange lady.

John trembled and every drop of colour left his face.

"Why!" he gasped. "Irene! You here—Irene!"

CHAPTER XIV

IRENE explained at once that having seen John's "ad" in a Lancaster paper, she had come right over and "pitched in."

John's heart beat so wildly as he gazed upon her that he thought she must hear it. She had grown so much more beautiful! Her figure was fuller and her stylish, close-fitting black revealed its graceful lines; her shoulders and head were more regally erect, her colouring much deeper than he remembered it—it was truly marvellous now! Surely she was a woman upon whom no man of blood could look indifferently.

It was not until several hours later, when supper was over and the children in bed, that they sat down alone in the sitting room to discuss the situation.

It was the first time John had sat down in his sitting room since he had lost his wife.

"For old times' sake, John, I'll help you out. Bygones is bygones with *me*. I don't know how *you* feel."

"You can't really mean, Irene, that you'll stay here and keep house for me and take care of my children!" he breathlessly asked. It seemed incredible that such heaven was to be his. His face, that had for many weeks been white and drawn, was

flushed; his eyes, that had been heavy and dull, were sparkling; his voice, that had been lifeless, vibrated with long-repressed passion. "You'll *stay* here with us, Irene?"

"That's what. To be sure I ain't the housekeeper Minnie was—Hen was all the time throwin' that at me——"

"I'll never throw it at you!" said John.

"Better not!" laughed Irene.

"You can have the spare room," said John eagerly. "It's awfully nice fixed. Minnie gave me that suit of furniture for a Christmas present. But we had to put it in the spare room for fear the children would get it scuffed. You'll like that furniture in there."

"The spare room!" Irene looked him in the eyes and laughed.

John thought, "How little she guesses what I'm feeling!—with her sitting here alone with me!—more beautiful than ever she used to be!—she that was to have been my wife! She don't nearly guess what I'm feeling! Women are that innocent! She wouldn't stay here if she guessed!"

But little did *he* guess that Irene was saying to herself, "Spare room yet! The country green-horn! Ain't he the slow one! Oh, Lord! I wonder if I can learn him anything!"

"I'd think, John, your hard luck would near make you wisht you'd never got married," she said, "since it turned out like this here! A house and two kids on your hands and only you to do all! A man that don't

go and hamper hisself with a famb'ly of kids sure has it good!—mind you how free he's got it yet!"

"How about the woman's side of it? I often think, when I look back at Minnie's life," said John with a catch in his voice, "that a woman pays too dear a price for what she gets out of marriage!"

"Sure she does—when she's the nut that most women are. See *me* bein' that kind of a nut!"

"You're right, Irene. Some women make selfish brutes of men! I only realize it now that it's too late—now that——"

"*Such* selfish brutes," broke in Irene spitefully, "that even a strong woman's got her hands full tryin' to knock some sense into 'em! Minnie had Hen Maus that spoiled up that I had my own troubles with him, belie' *me*, before I learned him where he had to get off!"

"I was so thankful for you, Irene, when Hen was—removed by Providence from your path!"

"Say, John, you say them things awful pretty! You always did speak so nice! Many's the time, since I lived in the city, that I wisht *I* had a nice education. Out here I never missed it any. But in the city it gives you a shamed face not to be educated that way. Oncet when me and Hen was out in Chicago, a man ast me, 'Where are you from?'—and when I sayed, 'From Pennsylwania back,'—he sayed, 'Can you talk it?'" She laughed boisterously. "Some lingo, ain't? I didn't know we talked so funny here till I went away from this here bum town.

With all *your* grand education, John Wimmer, why do you content yourself sticking in a hole like this here?"

"Because I'm not nearly educated enough to cut a figure anywhere else," John acknowledged.

"Och, it's cheek you need, not more education than what you're got a'ready. If you had some of Hen's cheek, you'd *get* somewheres "

"Not where Hen got, I hope!"

"To be sure," granted Irene, "he did have bad luck at the end."

"Good luck, I'd say! A quick death was an easy way out for him! If the police had caught him he'd of got a long prison sentence for attempt at *murder!* I trust," John added doubtfully, "that I don't hurt your feelings, Irene, by talking so plainly about your former husband?"

"You can't tell me nothing about Hen I don't know!"

"I suppose not. It must have been awful for you, living with him!" said John sympathetically. "And yet you don't *look* as if you'd had the hard life I always pictured you as having—with Hen. It don't show on you any."

"Hard life nothin'! I give Hen as good as he sent! Belie' *me,* I kep' *him* guessin' some! You bet you!"

John's subconscious mind winced at her coarseness (used as he was to Minnie's chaste, gentle speech) even while his conscious self thrilled at her musical

voice and hungered for her red lips, her white throat, her shapely shoulders, her wonderful hair (so much more abundant than it used to be). Could it be possible that at last he was going to realize, at least in part, the dream of all these years of thwarted desire?—that he was going to live under the same roof with Irene, sit opposite her at his table three times a day, walk out with her, talk with her of their thoughts and feelings as he and dear little Minnie used to do? Could it be that such unspeakable consolation as this was to be vouchsafed to him for the calamity that had befallen him in his loss of Minnie?

He saw that Irene's life in the city had changed her, given her an air of gayety, of assurance, that seemed strange to the serious-minded, country-bred schoolmaster. He felt awkward, inexperienced, before her self-confidence.

"It surprises me, Irene, that you've come through so fresh and strong from all your trials!" he told her. "I'd have thought that livin' with Hen Maus would have crushed even you!"

"Och, John, it would have took a smarter fellah than Hen Maus to get the best of me!"

"I always knew you were strong and courageous!" said John admiringly. "Now, about your stopping here with me—we've got to put it on a business basis," he added in some embarrassment at the necessity of a sordid money relation between them. "What salary shall I pay you, Irene, for being my housekeeper and taking care of the children?"

"Housekeeper and child's nurse! A large order! Ain't?" she laughed—but she caught herself up and added demurely, "We won't talk about *pay*, John. I come to accommo*date* you, and anything I can do to help you, I'll be only too glad to do."

"That's awfully kind of you, Irene! I can't nearly tell you how much I appreciate it—there ain't no words in the English language——"

"Only so you don't talk Pennsylwania Dutch to me!" she laughed.

"But, Irene, of course it goes without saying that I couldn't leave you work for me for nothing and you a widow!" John protested. "I'll pay you a salary—though to be sure no money can pay you for being so large-minded and big-hearted as to come to me in my trouble!"

"That's all right, Johnny!" she cried, patting his head—at which his face, forehead, and neck grew crimson; "we won't talk about salary, though. When I got to buy things, you can cough up the price. That'll be better."

"Any way you like it," agreed John, quite unsuspicious. "I'll see to it that you get all you are worth to me!"

"No more'n that?" she said playfully—and they laughed together over the joke.

"You'll like the kiddies!" he told her. "They're the cutest little tads! And awfully affectionate once they get to know you're friendly to 'em. The way they miss their little mother!" said John sadly.

"The other day Jacky was looking at her photograph and he said so wistfully, 'If that was my real muvver she'd open her arms and hug me!'—It broke me all up!"

"Och, what's the use? You got to live! Buck up!"

"You'll help me to bear it, Irene!"

"I'll do my darndest, old man!"

He felt angry with himself for shrinking at her way of speaking. "She always was awfully blunt and honest!" he reasoned with himself. "There ain't any hypocrisy about her."

"You'll get awfully fónd of the children," he repeated (was it perhaps to reassure himself?). "The funny things they're all the time sayin'! Here the other day Sophie asked me, 'Do storekeepers have homes and mothers?'—and the other night Jacky asked me, 'Fader, if a bear dot into our house, would you telephone for a hunter to come?' Last summer Minnie and I took them to the seashore for a couple of days and one day last week when I was telling them a story about the Jungle, Jacky said, 'Do savages that live in the Jungle wear nothing but bathing suits?' Bathing suits, mind you!" laughed John.

But he saw that Irene looked uninterested. "I guess it's awful tiresome of me to keep talkin' about my babies all the time!" he said, flushing. "It ain't reasonable to expect other ones to take interest in them like their own parents take. But wait till you

get to know them once! You'll be as crazy about them as I am—you can't help it. You see," he explained, "they ain't just like other children. They're cuter and smarter and prettier and——"

"Och, John, you're killing! Of course they're just like other kids! Why wouldn't they be? You'd have need to worry if they wasn't!"

"Well," John maintained, "I never saw other children around here that played so intelligently as my children play. To be sure the other children didn't have the kind of mother my children had—Minnie was all the time reading to them and telling them stories; and when they asked questions, Minnie was enough educated that she could give them instructive answers."

"Poor kids!" yawned Irene, "to have their brains so bothered! I don't hold to it!" she said tartly. "It's likely to go to their heads!"

"I don't think," said John judicially, "that they were over-stimulated."

"Stimulated! Did she give 'em spirits yet?"

John felt chilled. "Mentally stimulated, I mean."

"Och, John, you high-brow! Come off the bandwagon!"

"But indeed, Irene, it's as good as a moving picture show to watch my two children playing. Jacky was playing to-day that he was on a ship attacked by pirates and he hollered to God (he thinks heaven's so far off he has to holler) to send a storm to drown the pirates. Then he played that the storm

came and the pirate ship went down. So then he shouted to heaven, 'That'll do, God! You can stop your storm now—their ship is sinked!' I thought I'd die laughing at him. I kept wishing Minnie could hear them."

He paused, but Irene, looking bored, made no comment.

John, feeling it incumbent upon himself to awaken her interest in the precious babies she was to have in her care, talked on. "This morning when Jacky and Sophie fell awake, I heard Jacky telling his sister of a dream he'd had—how he dreamed he was in a burning house and how he was a brave hero and rescued all the women and children—and Sophie (her eyes all over her face with wonder) said to him: 'And *I* dweamed, too—I dweamed I was dere to help you!' Wasn't that cute?" asked John eagerly.

But with a white and shapely hand, Irene patted her yawning lips. And John, resolutely putting aside his sense of disappointment, said to himself, "It makes her feel bad, I guess, that she has no children of her own, when she hears about ours.

"Irene," he said to her, "it's a good thing you didn't have any children!"

"Well, I guess! I got all I can do to support myself!"

"I mean it's a good thing not to have perpetuated such a heredity as Hen Maus would have transmitted to his offspring."

"Holy cats! Have you eat the dictionary, John

Wimmer? *I* don't know what you're trying to say! Put it simple!"

"You wouldn't want a son that took after Hen."

"That's talkin'. Why couldn't you say it that way at first? But say! Your Min had the same blood as my Hen. What's the matter with you?"

"But the difference between her and her brother makes a person almost doubt whether there *are* any laws of heredity," said John sententiously. "Minnie never believed in heredity much. What are your views about that question, Irene?"

"I ain't got none! You're at the wrong shop, John, if you're after ideas. I don't deal in 'em!"

To herself Irene said, "Oh, Lord, ain't this exciting! I know I can't stand it for wery long! Askin' me my views about hereditary yet!"

"It don't matter anyhow what a *woman* thinks about deep subjicks," she told him. "I never yet seen the man that considers a woman's opinions worth nothing."

"I always thought Minnie's opinions worth considering—she was such a wise little woman!"

"Oh!" thought Irene, "damn Minnie! He's that nutty about her *yet* that I don't know if it's any use my buttin' in here!"

"It's a pity," she said aloud, "that Min didn't have some wise views about havin' so many babies, and about spoilin' her brother and about—och, look-a-here, the woman a *man* thinks wise is either awful slick or else a fool of a thing that don't demand

and take what's comin' to her. Say, John, I'm so sleepy I can't har'ly keep awake no more!"

She rose, took his two hands, and pulled him up. "Come on—conduc' me to the *spare room!*"

Again she laughed boisterously and her eyes challenged him. But although John flushed red and trembled, yet such was his self-control that, astute as Irene had become in some respects, she never suspected, as he said good-night to her at the door of the "spare room," how wildly he yearned to clasp her in his arms.

CHAPTER XV

INASMUCH as Irene Maus was John Wimmer's sister-in-law and a widow who, because of her father's illness and business failure, had to earn her own living, Hessville not only tolerated but praised her going to keep house for John.

"It ain't as if they wasn't related together," was the town's lenient judgment upon the arrangement.

In the fevered dream in which John now lived, with Irene presiding over his home, in Minnie's place, he was only dimly aware of certain physical annoyances which, in a normal state of mind, he would have found hard to bear—her bad cooking, the "bluff" she made at cleaning, the damp and wrinkled napkins, tablecloths, and sheets to which he was served; his very discomforts, when caused by her fair hands, seemed haloed with glory. Everything she touched was beautified for him. Everything she did had a charm.

But if he did not mind her domestic shortcomings, there was one failure of hers to which passion could not blind him. He loved his children too well not to know it when they were neglected. He soon recognized that except when he himself attended to their needs, they went quite uncared for.

"I know from my own experience with this job of housework, Irene, that there's too much work here for one person to do all," he explained her own delinquency to her, though Irene herself never apologized for it. "I know, now, that I left Minnie carry too heavy a burden—though she never left me see it was too heavy. Always cheerful and contented—and seeming always to have time a-plenty to sit down and talk with me, how was I to guess what a lot of work it took to have things the way she always kept them? Why, I thought Minnie had it *easy!* I *wanted* my wife to have it easy and I thought she did."

Irene was very tired of hearing of Minnie's virtues, but she had not yet reached the place where she could say so. She was playing a game, and though she had not an instant's doubt of her ultimate success, she knew she must go cautiously.

She did not have to wait long for her triumph. There came an hour, inevitably, when John's self-restraint gave way. It was one night just two weeks after her arrival. They had gone upstairs together and were about to say good-night at the door of the "spare room," when suddenly, like waters over a broken dam, his passionate, reckless protestations poured out upon her as he seized and crushed her to his heart.

"I love you, Irene! Don't you know it? I've always loved you! I've never for one day stopped loving you!"

"Och, John, are you nutty!" she laughed as she

clung to him. "Always loved me yet! Where did Minnie come in, then? Heh?"

"I've never stopped loving you—never for one day!"

"Yes, that's what you think *now*. And while you do think it, leave us get out of it all there is in it! Ain't, John?"

"You do love me, Irene, don't you?"

"Sure I do! What do you think I come here for? To enjoy myself cookin' and washin' dishes for you and them kids of Min's? It don't sound like me, does it?"

"*Did* you come because you loved me?" asked John wonderingly.

"Sure! Why else?"

He wildly kissed her lips, her neck, her hair. "If this ain't wonderful, what is it?" he cried. "Irene! We'll have happiness, won't we?"

"You bet you, old boy!"

"And you'll never feel, Irene, that I—that I *wronged* you? Much as I want you, dear—as I've always wanted you—I love you too much to wrong you!"

"You'll find it out about as soon as I do, Johnny—if you wrong me!"

"Haven't you any—any scruples, dearest?"

"What's the use? Scruples don't get you nowheres—not that I ever seen anyhow."

"I'll never leave you regret your love, darling! Never!"

"Mebby," she darkly opined, "*you'll* be the one to regret it—no tellin'!"

He closed her lips with his kisses.

. . . . . .

It was not until several days later that John began to have a faint realization of the abyss into which he had deliberately cast himself. He and Irene were alone in the sitting room after the children were in bed—sitting together just as he and Minnie had been wont to sit evening after evening for seven years. Yet how different was this fevered excitement from the quiet, peaceful happiness of that other life—that life which now seemed to John like a sweet, lost dream; a life in which there had been books, exchange of ideas, deep affection, mutual respect, aspiration. By contrast with his present thrilling experience, it seemed like Sunday School compared with a Broadway success.

Irene, wearing a diaphanous kimono, was lying on a sofa and he was sitting on the floor at her side, one of her hands clasped in his, the other smoothing his cheek or toying with his hair.

"This *is* happiness, ain't it, Irene!" he said dreamily, with a long sigh of deep satisfaction, as he pressed her hand to his lips.

"Yes—while it lasts."

"While it lasts! Can it ever end, dearest?"

"Sure it can—unless you want to tie me fast to you by law!"

"By law?"

"Don't be so dumb, John! You know what I mean!"

"You mean—marry you?"

"Sure!"

"But—but how could I?"

"Get divorced."

"Divorced!" He caught his breath in a gasp. "Divorced from Minnie because she's sick! Cast her off when she's helpless! I—I couldn't do that, Irene!"

"Och, well, all right, then. We can stick together till one of us gets tired. Ain't? Or till Minnie mebby fools us and gets well! Aha!"

Irene did not take seriously John's protestations that he had never, since the days of his betrothal to her, ceased to love her. She did not believe it. She believed that he had loved Minnie and that it was only his loneliness and his need in his wife's absence that made his passion turn to her.

"Minnie will never get well," John answered her. "The sanitarium doctors give me wery bad hopes that she'll ever be different."

"Then you could easy get a divorce if you wanted to—on them grounds."

"I don't want it! I couldn't do it!" he hotly asserted.

"Oh, all right then."

"You know how I wish I could marry you, Irene—beloved! But—to divorce Minnie!"

"If she's goin' to stay nutty all her life, *she'd* never know you divorced her."

"No, she wouldn't know it—but all the same I—I couldn't do it—I couldn't! She's Jacky's and Sophie's mother—I took her for better or worse!"

"Mostly for worse—ain't?—if she's to be on your hands all the rest of your days—a incurable nut! You poor Johnny boy!"

"I owe her a lot—she gave me Jacky and Sophie. And her dear little self! It's she took *me* for worse, Irene!"

"She sure did, seeing how things is turned out for her. But *she* don't know she did. She was satisfied whiles she had you, and now she don't know her loss—if she's like you say—her mind such a blank all the time. Didn't you see *no* change when you was at the sanitarium yesterday? You ain't said a word about it since you come back."

John shook his head, his eyes suddenly looking very tired. "None."

"Don't she never ast after the kids?"

"Never. She don't *know* me when I go!"

"Ain't it queer?"

"Not when you think what she went through—concussion of the brain from her fall the night I was shot; a premature confinement without proper care—me being at the hospital wounded and not being able to see after her; and then to top all that, child-bed fever! What could you expect after all that?"

"But, John, if the doctors all says she can't never

be nothin' *to* you no more, I don't see why you don't ac' sensible about it and get a divorce. No use cryin' over spilt milk. To be sure, if you feel a little conscientious about her that way, you could always pay to have her kep' nice at the sanitarium, even when she ain't your wife no more. I guess them doctors don't give you no hopes she might die, do they?"

"Irene, darling! Minnie was always a good wife to me and——"

"Oh, help!" laughed Irene, throwing back her beautiful head and showing her white, strong throat. "Say!" she cried derisively. "A woman that's a 'good wife' to a man always does get left—and it pretty near serves her right fur bein' such a soft mess! See what Minnie's *got* fur all them seven years of bein' a 'good wife' to you!—*me* here in your arms and her livin' in a houseful of crazy nuts! She'd of better done the way I done—I took my pleasure as I went along—it's the only way to *get* any. My adwice to you, John Wimmer, is get divorced and marry—or mebby you won't be able to hold me!"

"Look here, Irene," answered John earnestly, "I love you and I'll be true to you. But leave us never again speak about me divorcing Minnie. Promise you won't!"

"I won't have to speak about it—it'll be *you* that'll be speakin' about it—just as soon as you see you can't hold me without gettin' married to me. You mind if you don't!"

John shuddered and did not reply. How could he be sure that her prediction would not come true? It did not now seem possible—but a few months ago how impossible would have seemed his present situation!—Minnie in a sanitarium for the rest of her life, her mind asleep; and he living "in sin" with Irene, his first and only love!

"Och!" he suddenly started, "what's that?"

"I didn't hear nothing," said Irene.

"It's the children—they have fallen awake," he said hastily, starting to rise from her side.

"Och, set still!" commanded Irene fretfully, pressing the palm of her hand on the top of his head. "You hadn't ought to go up to 'em when they wake; it gets 'em too spoilt."

"I'll just open the stair door and listen if they need something," he said, drawing away her hand, but kissing it as he let it go. "Mebby they're thirsty, or scared, or—or lonesome for their mother."

"You spoil 'em something awful!" Irene scolded crossly.

John opened the stair door and listened. "They're scrapping!" he announced. "If other parents didn't tell me that their children all scrap with each other, I'd think mine were depraved!" he grinned. "They're near dismembering each other!"

"You ought to spank 'em good!" snapped Irene.

He looked at her wistfully. "If they were your own, Irene dear, you would feel so different!"

"Well, they ain't. And don't you think I

wouldn't settle my own good when they bothered me—if I had any!"

"Hi, there!" John called up the stairs as the noise of battle waxed louder.

Two sobbing voices called down from above as the boy and girl sprang out of bed and ran to the head of the stairs.

"Fader! Sophie says she won't marry me and I don't *want* to marry a strange lady that I ain't acquainted to!" bawled Jacky.

"But, Fader," wailed Sophie, "I don't want to marry a boy, I want to marry a printheth!"

"And she says," cried Jacky, pointing an accusing finger at his sister, "dat a drave yard is where they make dravy and she won't believe me when I telled her it arn't!"

"And, Fader, Jacky slapped me tause he says I say isn't I, for arn't I!"

John ran upstairs, picked them both up, and carried them back to bed, admonishing them, as he kissed them, to be quiet and not to get out of bed again. He felt deeply the tragic loss to his children of such a mother as they had had and he tried to make up to them in tenderness, patience, and indulgence for the love that had gone out of their lives.

"Fader!" Jacky manœuvred to detain him as he started to leave the room, "did God make Hisself?"

"Och, Jacky, son, no mortal man could answer you that! Anyhow, I never heard of any that could."

"But when Muvver was here," said Jacky plaintively, "if she didn't know the answers to my questions, she made up a answer. If you don't know wevver God maked Hisself, why don't you read a book and find out! I want to know!"

"Where is Muvver?" asked Sophie sleepily.

"In Phil-delf-ella," Jacky told her. "Fader, Aunt Iween says evvy body in Phil-delf-ella is richer'n kings, so please write to Muvver and tell her to fetch me a pony, won't you?"

"She wouldn't have money enough, Jacky."

"Is a pony too suspensive for even a king to buy?"

"But your mother isn't rich and she's wery sick, my dear."

"Poor piteous Muvver!" sobbed Sophie. "I wish my muvver would come home! It's years and years since I saw my muvver!"

John soothed and comforted his little girl, while Jacky chattered.

"Fader, do you mind that song Muvver used to sing to us, 'bout sin, shame, and sorrow?"

"What ith thin?" interrupted Sophie.

"Sin is putting a cat in water," Jacky promptly answered.

"Cruel ith thin," Sophie nodded understandingly.

"I know what patriotic is," Jacky boasted. "It's red, white, and blue!"

"I wish," sighed Sophie, "dat Muvver was here to sing me to s'eep—she'd sing, 'Jesus wants me to be

a little sunbeam.' A sunbeam's wed and yellow. I'll have to paint mysel wed and yellow wif Jacky's paints—for Jesus *wants* me to."

"I'd wavver be a wainbow for Him, then I could paint myse'f purple and blue and orange, too," said Jacky.

"Fader," asked Sophie, "was I borned when I was jus' on'y a teeny 'ittle baby and tould on'y jabber?"

"Yes, dear. Go to sleep. Father must go downstairs."

"If Muvver don't soon come back home," complained Sophie, "I'm goin' to ast Jesus to be my Muvver."

John got himself away at last and went slowly downstairs, thinking regretfully that he must not bore Irene with a repetition of his children's bright, cunning talk. How he would have hastened to tell Minnie all the amusing or touching things they had been saying just now, and how she would have delighted in their brightness, and how deeply and vitally at one he and his mate would have felt in their common love and interest in their wonderful and charming babies!

But he had learned by this time that his children did not interest Irene; that nothing interested her that did not centre in herself.

"Look-a-here, John," she greeted his return to her side, "you'll have to cough up some cash for me tomorrow. I got to go to town to buy myself some

clo'es. I seen by the paper there's a special sale at a big department store, of ling-ry and silk hose and coat suits."

"All right, dear. Will you take the children along to town?"

"Holy cats! Drag them youngsters along!" she laughed. "Not if I know myself! It'll be a awful relief and rest to be rid of 'em for a day!"

John tried to conceal his hurt. "I bet you you'll be awfully glad to see 'em again when you come back!" he ventured.

"Och, I could manage to worry through more'n one day without 'em if I put my mind to it!"

She offered no suggestion as to what disposition should be made of the children during her absence. John waited to hear her broach the subject. But as she did not, he said, "I'll have to take them to school with me for the day. It's darned hard on me, though! They're not used to school and they won't keep still. They set an awfully bad example to the other scholars."

He laughed, looking to Irene to share his amusement at the joke.

"I don't see nothing funny in that—in your children setting a bad example to the other scholars."

"Don't you? But it is funny. You see I ain't like Squeers—I don't fatten up my children for an advertisement."

"Who's Squeers."

"A Dickens character."

"What's *that* again?—a dickens of a character, do you mean?"

"A character in a novel, I mean," John briefly returned.

"Och," retorted Irene fretfully, "you're always talkin' about them book people like as if they was your neighbours and friends!"

"They are. I guess they were always a lot more real to Minnie and me than our *actual* neighbours."

"No wonder she's in a crazy house then! And you, Johnny, you better watch out, or you'll get there yourself!"

She patted his cheek playfully and smoothed his hair from his forehead. He bowed his head and kissed her lovely white neck.

CHAPTER XVI

NOW that Irene's claim and hold upon John were secure, her demands for money became incessant and, from his standpoint, very extravagant. Their relation being what it was, he felt bound to be far more indulgent than any Pennsylvania Dutchman, even an exceptional one like John, would ever dream of being with a wife. For a time he gave her everything she asked of him within the limits of his salary as a teacher. He had had a raise a year ago and he considered his salary of ninety dollars a month to be large. But he was now obliged to go shabbily clad; to deny himself books and periodicals which he greatly desired; to do without many things which he needed, while Irene decked herself in fine raiment and jewels.

There was a point, however, at which he took a stand—a point from which her most seductive blandishments seemed, at this stage, powerless to move him. He refused to give her a dollar of Minnie's income of one hundred dollars a month; nor would he go into debt.

"I use Minnie's income for her and the children. Not a dollar for myself *now*," he would reply to Irene's urging, emphasizing the "now" with a

significant kiss. "I've forfeited the right to use her money."

"So long as she can't use it herself, you ain't robbing her any if you do use it," Irene would argue.

But John refused even to discuss the question.

Irene, however, did not give up. "I'll make him use it," she resolved. "As if I'd do all I'm doing for a man that's got only ninety dollars a month yet, to spend on me and hisself together! I can easy bag bigger game'n that! He *must* be conceity if he thinks I love him good enough to take him for the little he's givin' me!"

The stakes for which she had played her game were much higher.

"I'll get my fingers on that little old pile Doc Maus left, or I'm a nut!" she said with secret fury. "I ain't wastin' my time *much* longer for the little I'm gettin'!"

Her frequent excursions to the city, upon which John seldom accompanied her (she did not seem to want him to), were sometimes prolonged for several days. Her account of herself after an extended absence was always vague and indefinite. John wondered at this indefiniteness, but being a very candid person himself, he never dreamed of suspecting her of any treachery. His instinctive fineness checked his pressing for information which she seemed reluctant to give.

He soon realized that her actual dislike of his children was reciprocated by them. They would

have nothing to do with her. At the table it was their father who must tie on their bibs, cut their meat, put "spreadins" on their bread. They refused to touch anything offered to them by their aunt. No discipline which John imposed could break down this attitude.

"You darsen't say 'I won't to your Aunt Irene!'" he would admonish his daughter. "Don't leave me hear you!"

"Lizzie Landis says it to her Aunt," Sophie would argue.

"Lizzie Landis don't know any better."

"Neever do I know any better, Fader!"

"I never seen two hatefuller children!" Irene would declare.

"I don't see why you two can't act *nice* with your Aunt Irene!" poor badgered John would plead with his boy and girl. "You never act so ugly when you're at Grandmother's!"

"Don't you see why, Fader?" Jacky, looking thoughtful, asked him one day.

"No, I don't," John answered rather hypocritically.

"Well, I'll 'splain it to you. You see, you and Muvver and Aunt Jennie and Aunt Susie and Grandmother and Aunt Sallie and *all* my parents love me. But Aunt Irene not."

"She would if you'd be good to her."

"But she ain't good to us. She shakes us so hard that nearly all the air gets out of us."

"If Aunt Iween don't wike us," Sophie added, "anyhow my muvver used to fink I was the nicest 'ittle dirl wound here!"

"When we're sassy to her she puts red pepper on our tongues," said Jacky. "Gee, but it burns! Say, Fader, if any robbers gets into this house, you just put red pepper on their tongues and they'll run away and never come back!"

Sometimes Irene would insist upon John's punishing the children for things that happened in his absence. This he found it very hard to do. Minnie had never asked such a thing of him.

"Jacky passed in*sults* at the washlady to-day, so's she up and left without finishing her work and *I* had to get at and finish all!" Irene one day complained to Jacky's father on his return from school. "Now if you don't punish him good, John Wimmer, I'll want to know the reason why!"

The "washlady," Mrs. Johnson, was the only coloured woman of Hessville, and not only had Jacky never seen her before to-day, but she was the first Negro he had ever seen at all.

"How did he insult her?" asked John with the keen interest he always manifested in any least thing said or done by his two children.

"Well, first it was Sophie—she up and said to Mrs. Johnson, 'You're a bwack wady, ain't you? What makes you so bwack?' Then Jacky *he* butts in and says to her, 'Why don't you wash yourself? You're too dirty. You're black! Go wash yourself

white!' Your children got to be learnt better manners, John!"

"You must say teached, not learnt, Aunt Iween," Jacky corrected her. "And, Fader, Aunt Iween always says, 'You kids keep quiet, I want to lay down.' But she had ought to say, 'I want to *lie* down.' If we say, 'I want to lay down,' we're hens; but if we say 'I want to lie down,' we're little boys,'" explained the schoolmaster's well-instructed son.

"The wabbit is going to *lie* some eggs for me; ain't he, Fader?" put in Sophie.

"Say, Fader," said Jacky, "Aunt Iween told a book-agent she was a widow-lady. Why is she?"

"Because her Mister's dead. She has no husband."

"Then was Muvver a widow-lady before she married you?"

"No. She was a maiden lady."

"Ain't Aunt Iween your wife now? And ain't my Muvver a grass widow? What is a grass widow? The book-agent told Aunt Iween *she* was a grass widow. Does she have to eat grass 'cause she hasn't any Mister to earn up money to keep her?"

"Och, shut up!" cried Irene. "Shut up, and give us a rest, can't you?"

When John refused to punish the children for their quite innocent questioning of the washwoman, Irene's resentment did not let *him* go unpunished.

He thought sometimes, in these days, of the peace-

ful home life, free from all discord and wrangling, that he had lost with Minnie. He knew that he would never have tolerated from her what he bore from Irene. Was that because he loved Irene so much more, he wondered? Or because he knew that Irene, being free, could leave him whenever things became unpleasant for her.

It worried him deeply to learn that in his absence she was in the habit of shaking and slapping the children and feeding them red pepper. He and Minnie had never resorted to such methods.

A small crisis came in his relation with her when one morning he found in his mail several large bills which she had contracted at city stores, unknown to him. They amounted to one hundred and fifty dollars, nearly two months' salary.

According to his standards, Irene had committed almost a criminal breach of faith in having run him into debt without his knowledge and consent. He had been giving her so large a share of his income lately that he was now too short of money to be able to pay these bills. Being firmly resolved not to draw upon Minnie's income, he was forced to borrow the amount at the bank at six per cent. interest.

It was on his way home from the postoffice, after having mailed the checks to Irene's creditors, that he wondered how he ought to treat this painfully embarrassing matter with her.

"I thought I was giving her a-plenty for her clothes! Why, Minnie never spent as much in a

whole year on dress as what Irene spends in a couple months a'ready and Minnie always looked awfully nice. To be sure, she hadn't Irene's *style*."

Yet he felt vaguely that Minnie had had a style in dress as individual, as characteristic of herself, as was Irene's—Minnie's being simple, refined, restful; Irene's elaborate, conspicuous, alluring. He did not, at this stage, stop to ask himself which of the two styles he preferred. He was deeply enamoured of Irene; of Minnie he never had been.

When he reached home, it was supper time, but Irene was not in the kitchen and there was no sign of a meal. The children, their faces tear-stained and forlorn, their clothes soiled, were alone in the kitchen. The eager joy with which they greeted their father was, he sadly realized, the measure of the desolation that his coming dissipated.

Sophie, who was inclined to be tragic and dramatic, pointed to a pool of water on the floor near an empty tin cup. "Dat's my tears dat I cried tause you didn't tum, Fader!"

"Aunt Iween locks up all our toys 'cause she don't like to clear 'em up—and we haven't anyfing to play wif," complained Jacky.

"I want my Teddy bear!" whimpered Sophie.

"Aunt Iween slapped us 'cause we tried to bolt in the parlour when she had comp'ny," added Jacky.

"Company?" repeated John. "Who?"

"A man. We heered him, but we didn't saw him," said Sophie.

"I thinked it was you, Fader, comed home from school," said Jacky, "and that's why I tried to bolt in; but Aunt Iween said yes, it was you, but she wanted to talk wif you alone—so she frowed me and Sophie out. But I told Sophie, 'It ain't my Fader, he don't speak in that woice.'"

"Is the man there now?" asked John.

"No, he wented away just before you comed home. I heered Aunt Iween fru the keyhole when she telled him school would soon leave out now and he better get a move on. I wisht," sighed Jacky, "that Aunt Iween would get a move on! I'm too tired of her!"

The wild idea occurred to John that perhaps Irene's husband was *not* dead, but in hiding from the law; that perhaps Hen was the recipient of the money which she was all the time extracting from him; that *that* was why she had to run up a charge account for the clothes she wanted; that perhaps she actually loved that scamp, Hen, and that the two of them were working——

The kitchen door leading into the dining room opened and Irene, radiantly handsome in her newest and gayest frock, cut very low at the throat, came into the room.

"Hello, Johnny! Back a'ready? I guess *you'll* have to make supper this evening, boysy. I ain't cookin' in this here frock—not on your tin type! And I'm too darned tired to cook, anyhow. Jacky!" she sharply commanded, "wipe up that there pool of water!"

"I'm too darned tired to," Jacky repeated her own words in such an exact imitation of her that John grinned involuntarily, downhearted though he felt.

"Didn't I tell you not to play with water?" demanded Irene. "Get a move on and wipe it now, I tell you!"

"I didn't play wif water," Jacky replied as he obeyed. "It's Sophie's tears wot she cried 'cause that man in the parlour wasn't Fader."

"John Wimmer!" cried Irene with a great show of indignation, "the way you leave these children tell lies all the time! I'm darned if I——"

"Irene!" pleaded John, "I wish you'd not use such words before the children. They're picking them up from you."

He rose and began to set the kitchen table for supper. He had grown almost expert at the job.

Under Minnie's régime, they had never had their meals in the kitchen. But although he did not like it, he agreed with Irene that it saved work.

"To be sure, John, if you think I poison your children," she retorted, "I can easy leave, so far forth as that goes! You only got to say the word, you know. But I must say, you've left things go pretty far before you decided I ain't good enough to associate with your kids yet!"

"It's only that I don't want 'em to get in the way of usin' coarse language, Irene."

"Coarse language! So my line of talk ain't refined enough to suit you, ain't it? Well, then, take

your children somewheres else! *I* won't break my heart! I'd be wonderful reconciled to the blow of losin' 'em!"

"Who was your wisitor this after?" he asked her.

"Wouldn't you like to know, darling?" she laughed teasingly, as she sat down comfortably in a big rocker by the window, while he bustled about, filling the teakettle and cutting bread. "You see, John, you ain't the only pebble on the beach—I got other admarers!"

"Oh, have you?" said John, turning his back toward her, as he slammed a slice of ham into a pan; he did not want her to see the flush of jealous pain that rose to his forehead at her words.

"Sure I have! Why not?"

"Help yourself. But have your bills sent to them then!"

He glanced at her over his shoulder to note the effect of this thrust.

"Did you get some of my bills, then, beloved treasure?"

"I certainly *did!*"

"Never mind, Johnny," she said caressingly, "them won't be the last ones you'll get—blee' *me!*"

"I think they *will*," said John grimly. "I'm opposed to going into debt. I never do it. I'm not going to begin *now*."

"Then drop this here rotten school teaching and get a *man's* job! Why, there's jobs in Harrisburg at the Capitol I know of where you can graft twicet

your salary! You're acquainted with some politicianers—*ask* 'em for one of them cinch jobs! I could easy work it for you if you'd gimme the dare to."

"Teaching seems to me a lot more of a man's job than stealing off of taxpayers!"

"Och, well," yawned Irene, "that depends, I guess, on how a body looks at it."

All during supper he noticed how unusually flushed and animated she was and he wondered, miserably, whether her mysterious visitor were the cause of her radiance.

After supper, she reseated herself in the rocker by the window. "I can't work in this here frock," she repeated.

So John "redd off" the table and washed the dishes, Jacky drying them and Sophie putting them away. After that, he took the children up to bed.

"I'm dog-tired!" he groaned when at last he and Irene were alone in the sitting room.

He meant to have it out with her about those bills. His opinion of her behaviour had not been modified by all the tiresome domestic work he had had to do since his return from a long day in his schoolroom.

But what was his astonishment to hear her say, before he could broach the subject of the bills, "Now, Johnny, sweetheart, don't look like a Gloomy Gus, for I want to talk money! Smile and look pleasant! Ever read that there book called 'Pollyanna?' Better

read it—it'll uplift you like anything. I couldn't go it myself—too soft! Elinor Glyn for mine, if I got to read a book! Say, Johnny, I got to have some money!"

"I was about to tell you, Irene, that after this I'll give you such an allowance—so much a month or week—as much as I can spare—and you'll have to keep your expenses inside that allowance. I won't have you running up bills against me."

"What'll be the allowance?"

"My salary's ninety dollars a month. I'll give you fifty. It ain't enough, I know. But it's more than I'll have left to pay for our food and for all my own and half the children's expenses. It's the best I can do, Irene."

"Fifty a month? I need seventy-five dollars right now to pay for a fur coat I bought (reduced to half price) and they won't gimme the coat till I cough up them seventy-five."

"I will give you fifty dollars a month," repeated John.

"You'll have to find seventy-five dollars for me *to-morrow*—or I'll lose that there coat—and if I lose that there coat, John Wimmer, you'll know it!"

"I paid three bills for you to-day, Irene, to the tune of one hundred and fifty dollars. My salary is ninety dollars a month."

"You draw one hundred dollars every month from Doc Maus's *es*tate that's by rights as much mine as yourn!"

"It's neither yours nor mine, Irene. It's Minnie's. I will not touch it except for her and the children. It costs eighty dollars a month to keep Minnie at the sanitarium."

"You can easy borrow the seventy-five for my coat."

"I borrowed the one hundred and fifty for those bills to-day. Understand me, Irene," he said in a tone of ominous quiet, "I will not go into debt any deeper."

"Now look-a-here, John Wimmer!" cried Irene shrilly, "I'll do something desp'rate if I'm provoked too hard! The idea of making all this here wild rumpus about seventy-five dollars and raising the rooft and stamping round here like a wild hyena and——"

"Please, Irene, you'll wake the children!"

"Damn the children! I tell you you'll have to get me that there seventy-five dollars!"

"You don't seem to stop to think, Irene, how hard I have to work for seventy-five dollars."

"I know how hard *I'm* workin' for it just now! I'm workin' my throat raw! Are you a-goin' to find me that there money?" she demanded.

"I am not, my dear."

"If you'd see how lovely that there coat becomes me, Johnny!" she tried wheedling. "It would melt your heart! For that you're not *got* a hard heart and that you *are* awful fond for me, I *know*—no matter how much," she tearfully added, "your sister Jen wants to say you don't really love me and that I'm a

burden to you and that I'm ruinin' your noble chark'ter and that I ain't nice enough educated for you. I near cry my little heart out the way Jen talks to me, Johnny!" She nestled to his side caressingly. "You won't leave 'em 'buse your little sweetheart, will you, honey-bug?"

"Don't be a damn fool, Irene."

"*Well*, John Wimmer!" she snapped back, sitting erect, "do you think I *enjoy* working the tremulo record till it near cracks? I don't *like* slavin' like a dog this way for every dollar I need! If you was half a man, you'd see to it that I didn't have to."

They were interrupted by a loud knock at the front door. No one in Hessville ever called as late as this —it was half-past nine o'clock. Every drop of colour left John's face.

"Minnie!" he gasped. "News from Minnie!"

Irene sprang up to answer the knock, but he stopped her. "I'll go."

"A telegram!" excitedly announced the only operator of Hessville, who always delivered in person the few telegraph messages that ever came for residents of the village. "Return answer requested."

John tore open the envelope with trembling fingers.

Recent manifestations indicate that immediate though very dangerous operation may lead to wife's recovery. Great risk, but only chance of complete recovery. Wire us authority to operate. Answer prepaid.

Doctors MANNING and SHERWIN.

CHAPTER XVII

AS JOHN had been obliged to send an immediate reply to the telegram, he had been able to consider only two alternatives—Minnie's permanent blankness, on the one hand; her recovery or death, on the other. Of course he had not hesitated. Better death than her present condition. So he had wired, "Operate"—and had felt, as he put his name to the telegram, as though he were signing his wife's death warrant.

He would have taken the midnight train for Philadelphia, but that he must find a substitute for his school and then take the children to the farm and leave them with his mother and sisters. His father would, of course, object, because the "women folks" wasted time when John's idolized children were there. Indeed the harsh and selfish old man was not above squandering some attention himself upon his only grandson, whom he secretly considered the "smartest" child that had ever been born. But he went far out of his way to hide this softness and (as he thought it) weakness from his son. To cover his own real pleasure at having the children at the farm, he grumbled whenever they came, at the work they made and the time they consumed.

John, however, found himself unwilling to leave Jacky and Sophie alone with Irene while he was in Philadelphia. "If they fall sick whiles I'm off, they must be with someone that'll care," he decided.

He hardly knew whether he felt more relieved or disappointed at Irene's manifesting no signs of being hurt when he told her that he would not leave the children with her during his absence. He did not yet understand her well enough to know that she would have been much more annoyed at having them on her hands.

Irene, left alone in the house for at least a few days and perhaps longer, had time to reflect upon some phases of the situation now confronting her and John which, in the confusing rush of events, they had not stopped to consider She wondered whether John, too, during his separation from her, was facing and wrestling with all the possibilities inherent in their precarious relation.

Should Minnie die (as she probably would) John would be free!—and rich! Would he want to marry her? She'd see that he *did!* It wouldn't be difficult. He was so ridiculously conscientious that, whatever his wishes, he would think it his duty. However, she was pretty sure that he *would* wish to bind her legally. He was crazy about her, simply crazy. Other men had been "gone on" her, but not one of them so "clean gone" as John still was.

Nevertheless, when you stopped to consider how greatly he disapproved of her handling of his absurdly

idolized children—maybe he would balk at marriage after all. But who ever heard of a man that put his children before his passion? It was surely foolish to fear that if he wanted her very much, he would let himself be foiled by a trifle like that!

"He's a man!—nuff said!" she decided. "All the same, I got to go easy with them kids now that things has come to a crisis! I got to play the soft-soapy game of a lovin' mother to 'em! Ain't it a mess? It sure won't come easy to me! But sooner'n lose that there fortune of Min's, I guess I can stick it out till I'm anyhow married oncet to John. *Then* watch me make them brats stand round and do what I tell 'em to! *I* won't spoil 'em any—not that you'd notice it! And I'll see to it that their pop don't neither!"

But if Minnie, contrary to all expectations and probabilities, got well? What, under such circumstances, would John expect to do about it? "Turn me out and bring back his wife, I guess! Well, he'll find out I ain't that easy disposed of!"

Was John, also, she wondered, realizing all these complications of their situation? Did he hope that the outcome of the operation would be his freedom to marry her? He had not hesitated an instant over his answer to that telegram. Did his prompt consent to the dangerous operation mean that he cared more, or less, for his wife than for his mistress?

"He shan't have her back!" Irene hotly resolved. "I'll blab the whole thing to her and she'll divorce him!"

Ah, but if Minnie divorced him, her fortune would go with her, and John without that fortune wouldn't be worth having!

"He could easy work it so's he could get that there money in his own hands, if only he *would*. Then Min could get her old divorce if she wanted to and *he* needn't give a damn! But he's so darned pertikler! It'll take awful hard work to make him touch her money."

She thought of a strong argument she could advance that might perhaps weaken his scruples. "He can't deny that one half of that there fortune was cheated off of Hen. So I got more right to that there half than Min has. He can't deny it. So I'll anyhow *try* that there argiment."

If it failed?

"All right, then John'll lose us both! Min'll divorce him and I'll jilt him!—the way he jilted me oncet. Min'll take the kids and her money and he won't have *nothing* left—wife, kids, home, money—and serve him right!"

Irene knew that in case of the failure of her scheme to marry John with his money, she would find much solace in the delectable sight of Minnie's chagrin and jealous rage upon hearing of her husband's love for another woman.

"I'll anyhow have that out of it!" she thought.

A few months ago, when she had first come into John's home, she had found him prematurely old, careworn, sad, and listless. Her coming had seemed

to restore his youth. He had become vigorous and active; he had not only grown cheerful, but, in spite of many worries, almost gay.

But on his return from Philadelphia, three days after the receipt of the startling telegram, all that he had recently gained seemed to have dropped away from him. He was grim and haggard. There was tragedy in his face, agony in the strained expression of his eyes.

Though the doctors called the operation successful he told Irene, they were not sure Minnie would live; hardly thought she would; John himself was sure she would not.

"She looks awful! I wouldn't know her! She's a skeleton covered with skin! She's shrivelled and gray in the face! Her hair's shaved off! I wouldn't know her!"

He shuddered as he covered his face with his hands.

"How long do them doctors say it will go till they know oncet if she'll get well—or not?" asked Irene, trying to cover her own eagerness under a tone of sympathy.

"They say she may linger on a while yet—or pick up. She's so weak, she might die any minute. I'm not to come again unless they send for me—the sudden shock of recognizing me (for they insist her mind'll be all right now, if she lives) might kill her. So I'm to keep away till they think it's safe already."

He did not see the gleam that shot from Irene's eyes at these words.

"Just seein' you might—might kill her? Did they say that?" she asked breathlessly.

John nodded dumbly.

Irene turned away for a moment to fuss at the stove. "That," she said to herself, her heart throbbing thickly, "might be a way out! I could fake a telegram from the doctors telling him to come——"

In the weary days of waiting that followed, John was touched by Irene's changed demeanour—her gentle patience with the children, her unobtrusive sympathy for his trouble and anxiety, her unwonted attention to his comfort, her kindness and consideration. It went far toward bringing him round, soothing his horrible nervousness, reëstablishing his faith in her, restoring his comfort in his home.

Yes, Irene acted well her part and was even more successful than she herself realized. For what John was really thinking and feeling during these days, she could not guess.

The fact was he did not understand himself. He had hours of acutest torture in which his burning passion for Irene warred with his loyalty and deep affection for his wife; hours when he loathed himself; others when he abandoned himself absolutely to the lure of Irene; times when he was ready to sacrifice the rest of his life to make amends to Minnie for what she was suffering; days when he could not see an inch ahead; when he could only passively await the outcome and let things happen as they would. Of one

thing, however, he felt sure—gentle though Minnie was, she would never forgive his disloyalty, should she recover.

Meantime, Irene was finding her virtuous rôle an almost intolerable strain upon her patience, her self-control, her life-long habit of self-indulgence. After a few weeks of quite exemplary behaviour, she realized that if she were going to keep it up, if she were not going to collapse hysterically and "raise hell," she would have to have a respite.

"I'll say I got to go to Lancaster for a day and then I can run on to Phildelphy and send him that there fake telegram," she decided one day when she felt she could not hold out any longer.

So that evening, as John sat reading in the sitting room, after the children had been put to bed, she came and sat on the side of his chair.

"Reading something inter*est*ing?" she asked as she clasped his wrist and tilted his book to see the title; "'Literary History of India,' by R. W. Frazer, LL. B., Lecturer in Telugu and Tamil at University College and the Imperial—holy cats!" she broke off. "If that's what a Normal school and a grand education does to a fellah, gimme Ignorance. Honestly, Johnny, what do you see *in* a book like that? I'd have the woolies if I had to wade through such dry punk! The only kind of a book I like to read is a silly book—the sillier the better for little Reeny!" she laughed as she ran her fingers through his hair.

He leaned back in his chair, hypnotized by the touch of her soft hand.

"Beloved treasure, I got to go to Lancaster to-morrow."

"What for, dear?"

"I got to see a doctor."

John started. "A doctor? Good God, Irene, you don't mean——"

"A baby?" she asked. She had not thought of that. She quickly turned it over in her mind—it might work better than her own idea. Could she risk such a bluff—with John as experienced as he was (the father of two living and one dead) and she herself so altogether inexperienced? No, she probably knew too little about it to deceive him.

"No, John, dear, that ain't it—you may thank your lucky stars! I got to see a doctor about my throat—something the matter with the sarcophagus."

"The what?"

"The sarcophagus," Irene firmly repeated.

"A sarcophagus is a coffin," said John stolidly.

"It is, is it? Well, then, what *is* this here bloomin' thing in your throat that gets on the blink?"

"I suppose you mean the oesophagus. What's wrong with it?"

"Germs. It's got to be sprayed. Can you leave me have the price?"

"I hope so. How much?"

"The specialist I want to go to charges twenty-five dollars per, dearie."

John sighed. "Minnie's operation," he began, but checked himself.

"Well, to be sure, Johnny, this here thing of havin' a harem full of wives ain't *cheap!* You can't expect it!"

"I'll try to raise the money for you, Irene," he responded, trying not to speak despondently. "You know I'd love to give you all you want if I only *had* it."

"You're got it if you'd only take it!" she retorted.

But John would not reopen that argument. Irene's efforts to prove to him that she was morally entitled to at least Henry's share of Doctor Maus's estate had thus far left him quite unconvinced.

"Will you wait, Irene, till day after to morrow to go to the city?" he hastily veered away from the unpleasant topic of the Maus estate. "That'll give me more time to get you the money. I ain't got it, you know. My salary's always spent already before I get it. I'll have to borrow it for you from the bank."

"Why don't you borrow the loan of some money off of Minnie? You wouldn't anyhow have to pay her int'rust."

John winced. Of late, in the financial stress of his heavy expenses, he had been sorely tempted to do that very thing. But as yet he had not yielded.

"I don't want to do that!" he said heavily.

"Minnie must always have been awful tight with her old money, to make you so pertikler about touching a penny of it!"

"She leaves the management of her money so entirely to me, Irene, that—don't you see?—that makes me feel more conscientious about taking good care of it than if she hadn't always trusted me so."

"Makes you feel conscientious—och! You sound like President Wilson's speeches yet! I wish't," she suddenly exclaimed, "you was more like Hen!"

"Wish I was like Hen! You can't mean that!"

"I mean," she hastened to add, "so's you didn't take things so hard. To be sure you're an awful hon'rable man toward what Hen was, but you do give yourself so much worry!"

"I don't give it to myself—you give it to me," smiled John.

"I know I'm an expensive luxury," she retorted. "Most good things do come high, you know, Johnny."

"Yes," he returned, kissing her hand, "and I'm paying a lot all right!"

"Not more'n I'm worth—ain't?" she demanded playfully.

"We don't measure human worth in terms of dollars," responded the schoolmaster.

"*Don't* we!" cried Irene mockingly. "What do we mean, then, when we say, 'So and so is worth thirty thousand dollars'—heh?"

"The good and great men of history, Irene, have never been the richest men."

"I don't know nothin' about history. And I ain't acquainted with any 'good' men, are you, Johnny?

But I do know that the only people that has any power about here is rich people. You don't hear any one askin' of a man, 'How good is he?'—but, 'How much has he got?'"

"It's all wrong that we're so sordid in America. Our ideals are too materialistic; our——"

"Now, Johnny, now! Come off your perch! Talk that highbrow stuff, and I'll get sleepy! I ain't Min, you know."

John repressed a sigh. He still missed greatly the "intellectual conversations," the earnest exchange of ideas, which he and Minnie used to enjoy.

The next day after dinner, at the noon recess, John, before returning to his school, forced himself to the hateful ordeal of trying to raise some money for Irene. But when he went to the bank to draw what little he had deposited there, he made a discovery that gave him a shock.

"Your money's all. You ain't got a dollar in," the clerk informed him when he presented a check for fifteen dollars, the amount he supposed he had to his account.

"All! Why, I never before miscounted like that! I thought I had yet fifteen dollars in."

"You did have till a couple days back. But Missus she drawed it out yet."

"Missus?"

"I don't mean *your* Missus. Hen Maus's widdah woman. Her."

"But I—I didn't give her—och, yes"—John,

who had turned white, caught himself up—"I remember now I did give her a check for the amount."

"I thought at the time it didn't look near like your penmanship. But seein' she's keepin' your house and is your sister-in-law, I thought, too, again, it must be all right."

"It is all right," John smiled in a sickly way as he turned to leave the bank.

He was uncomfortably conscious all that afternoon in school that his work was being done badly; that sometimes he hardly knew what he was doing or saying.

His pupils, of course, noticed his inattention and depression and that evening on their return from school, reported to their parents, "Teacher's Missus must be took worse—he acted so dumb and doplig!"

John, on his way home, wondered how he should broach this matter of the forged check to Irene. Forgery! She could not possibly realize the gravity of what she had done. He would have to try to make her understand. It was not the loss of the money, but the duplicity, the dishonesty; his not being aware of how he stood financially; being bankrupt and not knowing it.

In some respects Irene seemed so "dumb"—would he succeed in convincing her that such things as this she must not do?

A sickening weariness came over him at the prospect of the struggle. He detested controversy.

He loathed the money discussions in which he and Irene seemed constantly to fall. It was debasing!

For the first time in his life he found himself, today, feeling glad that the children were not at home. His sister Jennie had taken them to the farm this afternoon because Irene was to go to town early the next morning.

As he neared his own home, his heart grew more and more heavy. He felt as cowardly an inclination to run away as though he, instead of Irene, were the guilty one.

When he was about a block from home, he saw something which gave him another shock. The long, empty street of the village opened a clear view, at the distance of a block, of his own gate and porch. A man, dressed in clothes of city, not Hessville, style, stepped out of the front door and coming down to the pavement, turned toward the end of the street from which John was approaching; but seeing John, he instantly wheeled about and walked away in the opposite direction—which would take him, not into the heart of the village, but out into the country.

"Trying to avoid me?" wondered John.

He noticed just one conspicuous detail of the man's spruce attire—a green felt hat. He speculated, as he hurried home, whether this could possibly be the same man whose visit to Irene, some weeks previous, the children had betrayed to him; whose name or business she had refused to tell him.

The man seemed in a hurry and by the time John

was at his own gate, the green felt hat was far up the street.

He found Irene in the parlour, dressed out in her gayest frock.

"Who was that man?" he at once curtly demanded.

"What man, Johnny?" she innocently asked.

"The man that just left here. Who was he?"

"I didn't see no man——"

"The man who wore a green felt hat. Who was he?"

"Oh, *him!* Did you *meet* each other?"

"I saw him leave this house. What was he doing here? Who was he?"

"*I* don't know him. He's such a travelling agent."

"What did he have to sell?"

"A new kind of a carpet sweeper."

"He wasn't carrying anything."

"He had pikturs of it."

"Why are you all dressed up?"

"For you, beloved treasure!"

"I'd sooner you had on a dress you could *cook* in! I'm tired and empty."

"All right, I'll go up and change. You needn't have so jealous of a old book-agent, Johnny dearie!"

"Book-agent! You said a carpet sweeper!"

"*I* don't know what he was sellin'! I tol' him he needn't waste his wind, for I hadn't no money. So he beat it."

"What do you *do* with all my money? What did you do with the fifteen dollars that I had in the

bank that you *forged* off of me! Don't you know you could be sent to the penitentiary for forging my name? Do you know that? What you have done makes you a *criminal!*"

"Flatterer!' she slapped at him coquettishly. "Och, don't go and have a stroke of apo*plexy* over it, Johnny. Take Hood's Sarsaparilla!"

"You can't *do* this kind of thing, Irene! I've got to know where I stand financially—I——"

"Well, John, this here ought to be a lesson to you!" she admonished him in a tone of virtuous disapproval. "I hope this'll learn you to gimme enough money so I don't *have* to commit crimes to get what I need!"

"Have you no sense of shame, Irene?"

"Sure I have! I'd be awful ashamed to be as tight as what you are, John Wimmer! I sure would! Do you s'pose I'd forge a check if I wasn't drove to it? Sure I wouldn't! I don't enjoy doin' it! It makes me awful nervous!"

"Irene! If ever again you forge my name, I'll warn the bank——"

"Don't be a nut, John! To be sure, I can't work *that* game no more! I ain't such a bonehead as to try to work off a trick on you after you'd found it out! Don't be so dumb!"

"For God's sake, Irene——"

"Don't take Gawd's name in wain!" she gravely reproved him "Now," she said conclusively, "I got to get a move on and change my dress."

She danced out of the room singing.

John sank heavily into a chair by the window. It was hopeless. He could not make any impression upon her. What should he do? Wearily he leaned his head on his hand, and in doing so, his arm came in contact with two letters in his coat pocket which he had taken from his postoffice box on his way home from school. He had not yet even glanced at them so distracted had he been over the discovery of the forgery.

Mechanically, now, he drew them from his pocket. "The same old news from the hospital, I guess," he said to himself—the bi-weekly report from the doctors invariably being that there was no change as yet in his wife's condition.

Yes, here was the familiar printed address in the corner of the envelope. He tore it open. It was, as usual, typewritten and marked "Dictated." It was not, however, the customary brief few lines, but a long letter. And the name at the end—not that of the doctor! The name! John's head swam, his vision was blurred. He steadied himself and looked again. "Minnie."

He trembled so that the letter shook in his fingers. A letter from Minnie herself! A voice from the grave! Minnie speaking to him after all these months of silence!

He rose, and going into the seldom used parlour, he locked the door—to be alone with his letter; alone for a few moments with Minnie, his wife.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOHN, MY DEAR:

The nurse is writing this for me, I'm too weak to write myself. She says I darsent make it long. It seems as if I had been away in a far off country where I didn't even *know* you and Jacky and Sophie. I don't know anything about being sick so long. I'm very comfortable and contented now. It surprises me that I don't fret for you and the children. The nurse says I'm too weak to. The doctor says you can't come to see me yet awhile—not till he's sure I'm strong enough to stand it. I feel so weak, I seem to shrink from seeing you yet. Isn't that queer? You seem so far away—you and the children—as if I would have to take a long, hard journey to reach you.

Your loving

MINNIE.

The next few lines were from the nurse—

This is as far as your wife was able to dictate. She is so weak that the slightest thing might turn the balance against her. We have hopes, now, for her complete recovery if she is kept absolutely quiet. You can write to her, but the doctor thinks it will be a month or more before she can be visited.

Very truly yours,

GRACE KENTNOR.

The rush of joy that surged up in John's heart at the sound, as it were, of Minnie's own voice from out the long, blank stillness—at this sudden, unexpected restoring of the broken current of their joint life—was a revelation to him of the depth and the vitality of his union with her. He felt like flying to meet the happiness of that reunion. The weeks of patient waiting before he could realize it in its fulness and completeness seemed unbearable. His mind refused to consider, now, the impassable barrier to her return that existed in his home. At this touch of Minnie's very self, he knew, from the deep delight it gave him, how hungry he had been for his companion, his mate, the dear creator of his home. With an overmastering eagerness to talk to her at once, to pour out his heart to her, he sat down before the little walnut desk in the parlour (he had given her this desk on her last birthday), seized tablet and pencil and began to write to her. So many things crowded upon his mind to say to her—the accumulation of all these months of separation—he felt that he would like to sit there and write all night long.

"But I must go slowly or I'll overtax her strength," he checked himself. He felt as tenderly toward her precarious weakness as he had been wont to feel toward the appealing helplessness of his infants.

When presently, as his pen was flying back and forth across the tablet, Irene called him to supper, he felt an irritability at being interrupted that was not at all characteristic of him.

Immediately after supper, the children not being at home to require his attention, he returned to his fascinating task. He had not enjoyed anything in a long while as he was enjoying this communion, on paper, with his wife.

It was an especial luxury to be able to talk freely about the children to one who was as interested in them as he was himself.

You'll be glad to know, my dear, that the babies grow prettier and sweeter and smarter every day. The dignity that Jacky put on, on his sixth birthday—you'd have thought he had come of age! The other day I told him he darsen't say he "ketched" the ball—so after while he said to me, "Here, Fader, caught it!" He had the toothache one day and some fever with it and he said to me, "It's very painful, Fader—much more painful than just a pain." And he told the doctor, "Hot air comes out of me!" The Doc told him he wasn't the only person hot air came out of! Sophie gets to look more and more like you. I often have to just sit and look at her—so much like you she grows. The way those children miss you, dear! Oh, my dear, my dear, when once I have——

The turning of the door knob interrupted him, and Irene's voice demanded, "What you got the door locked for? Leave me in!"

He rose reluctantly, and after an instant's hesitation, he thrust the unfinished letter into a drawer, locked it, and put the key into his pocket.

"What're you doin' all alone in here anyhow?"

cried Irene as he opened the door to her. "And with the door locked yet!"

"I was writing," he briefly answered.

"Why do you have to lock the door fur just to write?" she asked suspiciously.

"To be alone and quiet."

"Huh!" she commented, not satisfied, but deterred by John's tone and manner from pursuing her inquiry.

For the rest of the evening she found him strangely distracted; at times quite unaware of her; at others, short with her as he had never been before.

"Now, look-a-here, John Wimmer," she presently demanded, curiosity getting the better of the vague, uncomfortable awe which his manner invoked, "what's happened? What's the matter of you? You're actin' awful funny, I *must* say!"

"I've been thinking, Irene, what a mess a man can make of his life by not sticking to the straight and narrow road!"

"Your life wouldn't need to be such a mess if you wasn't so scared to touch a dollar of that there money that's by rights half mine anyways! If you'd only——"

"I wasn't thinking of money. Don't let's talk about money this evening! I'm sick of the sound of the word!"

"*Well*, John, if you're too slow to need money for yourself, *I ain't!*"

"So I have observed!"

"Och, you needn't go and get sarcastic that way! You might as well understand that I'm an expensive luxury that you're got on your hands!"

"I do understand it."

"What's the matter of you to-night?"

"Irene, suppose—suppose Minnie should get—should get well?"

"Not much danger, is there?"

"Danger? Yes, she's still in very great danger. A tilting of the scales—and we—the children and I—we'd lose her."

"And if the scales ain't tilted?"

"With great care she may get well."

"Gee! That sure would be a pickle fur us, John, wouldn't it? But don't worry! Time enough to think about it when we're up against it."

"We've got to face it."

"Well, I'm not one to borrow trouble, if you *are!* Just wait a week or so and leave us see how things goes before we face it."

John was not unwilling to postpone the ordeal of unravelling the coil in which he found himself enmeshed. Minnie's possible ultimate recovery seemed so very far off in the future.

That night when Irene went up to bed, he remained below. "I ain't sleepy. I feel for reading till a while yet," he answered her puzzled and suspicious questions as to why he didn't "come up along."

It was not until he felt sure she must be asleep

that he ventured to return to his letter in the parlour.

I know, my dear, dear Minnie, that you are not strong enough to read all this that I'm writing to-night. But I got to talk to you, whether or no—and if I don't send it all to you at once, I'll send a little at a time. I wish now that I'd have kept a daily record of the sayings and doings of the children while you were sick—but, my own dear wife, we never thought you would get well. What I went through in those first weeks!—and what I've learned about you—about what a wife you were to me and what a mother to our children! Until I had to try to learn to live without you, I certainly didn't know all you were to me, Minnie! And as for Jacky and Sophie—all the love and care that *I* could give them could never make up to them for *your* devotion.

And so on through many pages. He told her of his school work, of his wrestlings with housework, of his futile advertisings for a housekeeper. "Of course Jennie and Mother helped me out a good bit," he wrote.

It was a new experience to him to find himself inhibited from speaking to Minnie of some things—he had never had but one secret from her in all his married life. But now, everything which he started to tell her presented difficulties, embarrassments, pitfalls. "The way of the transgressor *is* hard!" he kept thinking at every détour he was forced to make in his narrative. He continued:

I guess it won't surprise you, dear Minnie, to hear that I've done almost no reading at all since that fatal night of the shooting. I seemed to lose all interest in reading books without you here to share them with me. And you know there's never been any one *else* I could talk to of books. And to have ideas and not be able to hand them out to an interested listener, but keep them bottled up in yourself—well, it's fierce!

Of the many sheets of paper that he covered that night, he mailed only a few, on his way to school next day.

Irene did not leave for the city that morning. "I've changed my mind," she announced at breakfast.

"Why?" he asked indifferently.

"You need watchin', that's why! You're actin' queer! You see, Johnny *I* know, if Minnie never did, that you're some bird! I'm keepin' you in sight."

He scarcely heeded her only half-understood innuendoes.

"I'll bring the children home then," he replied.

"Och, you needn't be in a hurry to! Why don't you give yourself a holiday from 'em fur a couple days?"

"I live for my children, Irene."

"But a little fur yourself, too, I'm thinkin', John. Ain't?"

"A man hasn't any right to bring children into the world and then put his pleasures before their best welfare."

"Now what are you drivin' at with all that fine talk anyhow?" she asked suspiciously. "Put it plain!"

"Och, never mind. Give me another cup of coffee, please."

During the next few weeks letters from Minnie came more and more frequently, each one longer, more like her old self, than the preceding one. John, never mentioning these letters to Irene, eluded her inquiries as to what news he received from the sanitarium; and in order to avoid her curiosity as to why he locked himself into the parlour so often, he now remained in his schoolroom every day long after the closing hour, to write letters to Minnie undisturbed; briefly explaining his late return home by the statement that he had "extra work to do."

The only drawback to this arrangement was the children's mournfulness over his prolonged absences. In spite of Irene's recent forbearance and patience with them, he could not help feeling uneasy at leaving them, through so many hours of the day, alone with one who was not fond of them and who was sometimes very harsh to them.

When on Saturday and Sunday, also, he was obliged to go to his schoolroom for this "extra work," he always took the children with him, letting them scribble on the blackboard while he wrote to their mother.

It was hard to repress his desire to talk to his children of their mother, to read them snatches of her

letters, to tell them that perhaps some day they would have her back again. But he knew that of course anything he told them they would be apt to "leave out" before Irene; and therein lay danger—for Minnie, for himself, for his children, and, alas, for poor Irene herself!

He hated the double dealing into which circumstances seemed to force him these days—he who had always been so direct in his relations with others.

"He's up to something!" Irene decided indignantly, when she presently became conscious of his evasions. "If I don't believe Minnie's gettin' well! I'd ought to have sent that there fake talegrap from the doctor sooner! Mebby I'm too late! I got to get busy and find out what's what!"

She resented the many hours John now spent away from her in his schoolroom. "I never knowed no other teacher to work so long," she chided him. "If it brang you in more pay, I'd say, Go *to* it! But it don't, does it?"

"No."

"You're gettin to be like old Doc Maus—you're givin' your services too cheap. People always turns a man down that does that."

"I know they do; and invariably admire and honour the man that overcharges and exploits them! Och, human nature ain't a pretty thing when you come to think of it!"

"Then if you know folks is like that, why do you ac' like such a nut?"

"'Every why hath a wherefore,' Shakespeare says."

"John Wimmer! Why can't I never get no sensible answer out of you no more, to a plain question? You that wants to be so intelligent!"

"'Ask who is wise?—You'll find the selfsame man
A sage in France, a madman in Japan,'"

John flippantly quoted.

"Och!" cried Irene, "quit makin' poitry at me!"

"It was Tom Moore, not me, that made that poetry, Irene."

"Who's he? I never heard of him."

"Poor fellah!"

"Say, John, it ain't like you to try to be funny! And it don't set well on you, neither. *You* ain't no funny man—you never was and you never could be. It ain't in you. Now Hen he *could* be funny. When he wasn't strickly sober, he was a scream!"

"Irene!" protested John, "don't make yourself out worse'n you are yet!"

"Worse'n I am!" she repeated resentfully "Och, well, if it's a choice between in*sults* and poitry, gimme the in*sults*. I understand 'em better. When it comes to in*sults* I ain't fightin' so in the dark. Say, John, *don't* you think it's the pot callin' the kittle black when you try to put it all over me that you're got such a grand moral char'kter?"

"I'm not trying to do that," returned John as he rose and removed himself from the range of her questions.

But there was another besides Irene who asked

inconvenient questions. The time came soon when he had to meet Minnie's inquiries as to who kept house for him and took care of the children.

He spoiled several sheets of paper trying to answer that question honestly.

"I got a hired housekeeper," he wrote. But that was too lacking in candour. He could not stand it. So he tried another.

"I advertised for a housekeeper, but didn't get one, so a member of the family came to help me out."

"She'll think, to be sure, that I mean one of my sisters," he thought.

He could not deceive her.

You'll be surprised to hear who's with me, Minnie, helping me out. Your sister-in-law, Irene!

This, after some misgiving, was allowed to stand.

Minnie's response was strangely humiliating to his feelings.

I hope I'll get well soon, for I know it must be hard on you, John, as fine-natured as what you are, to have a person like Irene around you and the children. I do hope they won't pick up her coarse ways and her common talk. Please watch that they don't, if you can, without hurting Irene's feelings.

And, John, dear, I know you *will* be careful not to leave Jacky get hurt when he rides a horse at his Grandpop's. His joy over a horse reminds me of his Ma when she was a little girl—I've seen that woman get a ride out of two chairs tied together to make the head and tail of a beast!

Occasionally Minnie's letters gave John some dark hours of despair; as when, for instance, she wrote,

I see so many different kinds of people here—I didn't know that it gives so many kinds of people in the world! And all so different from each other; the doctors, the nurses, the orderlies, the other patients. And, John, my dear, the more I see of men-people, the more I know that *my* man is a fine, up-standing specimen.

"If she knew! If she ever knows!" John's heart groaned over her.

The time was surely drawing near when he and Irene would have to meet and face their situation.

He believed that in her own selfish way Irene cared for him. Had he not ample proof of it? And because of this he surely was obligated to her. His own predicament seemed to him inexplicable—bound to two women whose opposing claims left him (any way you took it) a miserable brute!

But his dominant feeling he found to be a dread, an actual fear, of Minnie's judgment of him. How strange it seemed to him to be fearing the very presence of his gentle wife—she who had always been so pliant in his hands that he had done with her as he would; who had spent her days in studying to please him; who had looked up to him as to a god!

"'How conscience doth make cowards of us all!'" he intelligently quoted at himself.

He made a second attempt to "sound" Irene as to her own expectations in the event of Minnie's recovery and return.

"You know, Irene," he began uneasily as they sat together one evening in the sitting room, "our present relation probably can't go on indefinitely."

"Why not?" she quickly demanded.

"My wife may get well."

"And if she does? What then?"

"What would you suggest, Irene?"

"I ain't worryin' about it."

"I am."

"Well, you can if you want to! If you purfur an invalid wife to a husky——"

"Look here, Irene," he hastily interrupted, "if you and I hadn't believed that Minnie was incurable, that she was as good as dead, we never, never would have begun the relation in which we've lived! Now this is Minnie's home—she owns it; I am her husband, not yours; Jacky and Sophie are her children, not yours. What is your claim here—on me and this home—compared to hers?"

"Do you forget what you promised me when I first come to you?—'I'll be true to you,' you tol' me, 'and I'll never leave you regret it, darling, never!'—that's what you sayed! And you sayed, 'I love you too much to wrong you!' And you tol' me you'd *always* loved me!—that you'd never stopped lovin' me! That's what you tol' me! If you don't remember it, *I do!*"

"I do remember it, Irene—every word of it," he wretchedly admitted.

"Well, then, are you a-goin' to live up to it, or ain't you?"

"I am obligated to you—but I am bound, soul and body, to Minnie."

"So you're plannin' to jilt me a second time, are you? Whiles me and you was still promised to each other, you went and ast Minnie Maus to marry you! You drove me into marryin' a fellah like Hen Maus! Then when I took pity on your helplessness here and come to help you out, you lured me into goin' the limit! And now you want to turn me off!"

"I'll try to meet your wishes, Irene, as far as lies in my power—if you'll only tell me what they are. I'll do everything for you that I *can* do—except injure or hurt Minnie."

"It don't matter, I guess, how much you hurt and injure me!"

"Yes, it does. I don't want to hurt and injure you!"

"Well, look-a-here, John, leave me just tell you a certain fac'—*I'm here to stay!*" she affirmed, folding her arms with a determination that seemed to John appallingly hopeless. "When your Minnie comes back, you can ast *her*, not me, what *she's* goin' to do about it!"

It was only a few days after this drearily unsuccessful attempt to come to an understanding with Irene that a letter from Minnie announced triumphantly,

"The doctor says I am gaining so quick, he thinks in a few weeks you dare come to see me! Sound the loud timbrel!"

It was this note which fell into Irene's hands when one night, driven by her suspicions and her desire to know the truth as to Minnie's progress, she rose from her bed, went to John's room across the hall, and assuring herself that he was asleep, searched his pockets for letters.

"A few weeks!" she thought in consternation. "In a few weeks a'ready he has dare to go to see her! Gee, I got to get busy right aways if I'm a-goin' to stop it!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE next morning after John had gone to school, Irene's search through the desk in the parlour for stationery proving fruitless (as John kept his supply at school) she slipped on a sweater and went to the new General Store to buy a bottle of ink, an envelope, two sheets of paper (two in case she spoiled one), a pen and a stamp. Equipped thus, she went home and, while the breakfast table stood and the grease congealed on plates and pans, she set herself to the unaccustomed task of composing a letter.

When the strenuous ordeal was concluded, having addressed the envelope to *Mr. Albert Wenrich*, at Lancaster, she carried it to the postoffice.

It was in the noon mail that same day that John received an unexpected letter from the sanitarium; as this was not the usual time for one of his quite regular bi-weekly letters from Minnie, he was startled. With a sharp pang of alarm he found the name of the nurse, instead of his wife's, at the end of the note. Could Minnie have had a set-back?

MY DEAR MR. WIMMER:

Dr. Conrad thinks a few weeks at the sea would hasten your wife's convalescence. She doesn't pick up so fast as

we should like to see her. So with your consent we will at once remove her to Oyster Cove to our cottage hospital there—five miles from Atlantic City—where she will have just what she has here—nourishing diet, a doctor and nurse, with the addition of the invigourating salt air. Kindly wire your consent.

Dr. Conrad thinks you may be able to come to see your wife at the end of her first week at the sea. Not before. We will notify you.

Sincerely yours,
GRACE KENTNOR.

P. S. Mrs. Wimmer's address at the sea will be Cottage Hospital, Oyster Cove, New Jersey.

John lost no time in telegraphing his reply.

As he walked home from the telegraph office, it was with strangely mingled feelings of elation and dread that he realized the nearness of the precarious crisis which Minnie's recovery was going to precipitate. His hunger for her, his almost feverish excitement at the prospect of his imminent reunion with her, brought him a sudden vision of a truth which gave him a shock.

"Minnie *always has been* my true mate! Not the woman I've spent myself longing for all these years! I've been a blind fool! No other woman could ever have met me as Minnie has met me! Why, in the deepest places of our lives we have been at one—we've been one mind, one flesh—and, fool that I've been, I have not known it! Didn't know how blessed

I was! Believed I'd missed the truest and best marriage!"

He marvelled at himself as he thought of Irene in the light of his present knowledge of her. "I mistook for love a lurid fire, a blinding glare, that burnt out all that was fine in me!—while my true love for my mate—a clear, steady light," thought John, "that illumined all my days!—I misvalued it! Oh, God! Why was I so fooled?"

And now that he had waked up to know that Minnie *was* the only mate for him in all the world, now perhaps it was too late!

"If I have escaped losing her through death, I may lose her through worse!"

It was two days later, at about nine o'clock in the evening, that a very peculiar thing happened. Irene had just gone up to bed, leaving him reading below, when the Hessville telegraph operator, in a state of more than his usual excitement in delivering a personal instead of a business message, arrived at John's door with two yellow envelopes, both from Philadelphia. John's heart stood still as he saw them. Something must have gone wrong!—Minnie was worse—a mishap on her way to the sea!

He tore open one of the envelopes.

Wife worse. Come right away. Don't lose time when you get here, but come straight to her room, number 16, third floor.

CONRAD SANITARIUM.

John's shaking fingers tore open the second envelope. "This," he thought, "is to say she's dead!"

Mrs. Wimmer bore journey yesterday to Oyster Cove splendidly. Her condition most satisfactory.

DR. CHARLES CONRAD.

John stared helplessly at the two papers in his hands.

"Say!" exclaimed the excited and curious operator, "them two telegraphs don't sound *according* to each other—ain't not?"

"One says she's at Oyster Cove, the other that she's at the Phil-delphy hospital!" cried John huskily. "Which one came first?"

"The one that says they got bad hopes fur her come ten minutes ahead of the other one. You can see the time marked on 'em. I guess, John, you can't tell rightly which one is more reliable—ain't not?"

"I don't understand it! I'll phone to the hospital!"

"Och, John, it costs expensive to phone to Phildelphy! Seventy-five cents yet! Don't be so reckless!"

But John was already running up the street ahead of the operator, to the public telephone at the telegraph office. By the time the telegrapher got there, the schoolmaster was talking to the long distance operator at Lancaster.

After an agonizing wait of ten minutes, he was connected with the hospital; and after another five

minutes, Doctor Conrad's voice came to him across seventy-five miles.

"Doctor Conrad, this is John Wimmer—*how* is my wife now?"

"I sent you a telegram an hour ago, telling you she was doing splendidly. I wired you as soon as I returned to Philadelphia after taking her to Oyster Cove."

"I got that telegram—but another one came ten minutes earlier saying she was dying!—at the Phil-delphy hospital!—and telling me to come right aways!"

"What! Some mistake, Mr. Wimmer! We took her away from the Philadelphia hospital yesterday morning."

"And this telegram is dated to-day!" cried John.

"That's very queer! Whose name was signed to it?"

"It was signed 'Conrad Sanitarium.'"

"No telegrams are ever sent from here signed like that! Someone bas been trying to play a trick on you, Mr. Wimmer—someone with a rather perverted sense of humour!"

"But I don't know any one in Phil-delphy since my sister moved away from there—and the telegram is from Phil-delphy!"

"The thing should be ferreted out!" exclaimed the doctor.

"And I'm *not* to come to see Minnie yet awhile, ain't I?"

"Not a day before we send for you. Mrs. Wimmer is not out of danger and could not bear the excitement of seeing you. Mr. Wimmer! Have you an *enemy?*"

"Well—one or two or so—but none wery serious."

"An enemy that wanted to injure your wife must have sent you that telegram, I think! Well, be thankful that it *is* a trick!"

"I am, I am! And thank you, thank you!" returned John, his voice thick with emotion. "Good-bye, Doctor."

The inquisitive operator, eager to hear what the schoolmaster had learned, was doomed to disappointment, for the look in John's eyes as he blindly staggered out of the office deterred the man from daring to question him.

Who had played this miserable trick upon him? All the way home he tried to "ferret out" the meaning of it. What had been the purpose of it?

"If a person wanted to injure me through Minnie, they took a dumb way to do it! For if she *was* at the Phil-delphy hospital yet, and hadn't the dare to see wisitors, just as if the hospital authorities wouldn't have stopped me from getting to her room!"

But who would want to so injure him and Minnie? Irene, hoping to marry him if Minnie died, was of course not the guilty one; she was not in Philadelphia, she was here in Hessville. And whatever Irene's faults, she certainly wasn't capable of trying to murder people who stood in her way!

He considered the fact that the villain had been someone who knew the number of Minnie's room at the hospital. But this suggested no clue.

The stupidity of the plot puzzled him almost as much as its wickedness.

Suddenly there flashed before his mind, he knew not why, the green-hatted man dressed in clothes of city cut, whom he had one day seen leaving his house and about whom Irene had behaved so mysteriously. "I wonder if that guy came from Phil-delphy?" he thought.

The idea persisted in haunting him in spite of its rejection by his common sense.

"It's too far-fetched to think that Irene would plot with another man to have me kill my wife! I'm dippy!"

But next morning as he sat opposite her at the breakfast table, contemplating her thoughtfully as he sipped his coffee, he suddenly resolved to test her a bit.

"See here!" he said, taking from his pocket the doctor's telegram, "I got that last night after you went upstairs."

The colour flew to her face as she took from him the yellow paper. He watched her, fascinated, while her countenance changed from surprise to consternation.

"Why—why, she ain't at the hospital no more then!"

"No. Left two days ago."

"Oh! But—why, look-a-here, John, if she's well enough to be took to the seashore, there's somepin awful funny about them keepin' you away from her all this time! I believe they're *trickin'* you! I believe she's plenty good enough fur you to see her. You better look into it! Why don't you go to this here Oyster Cove and take 'em by surprise? *Force* 'em to leave you see her!"

"I got another telegram last night," said John.

Irene turned from crimson to white. "Another one yet! What was *it* about?"

He drew it forth and watched her as she read it.

"Say, John! I believe this *here* telegraph's the one you better mind to. You better go on and *see* your wife oncet and find out what's what!"

"But I talked to Doctor Conrad on the phone."

"Oh!" exclaimed Irene, catching her breath. "You did, did you?"

"Yes, I did."

"And what did *he* have to say?"

"That telegrams sent out by the hospital are never signed as that one is—'Conrad Sanitarium.' He says I must have an *enemy*. Someone that wants to injure my wife and me."

"Och! Punk!"

"This enemy of mine—he took a clumsy way about it, didn't he? He must be awful dumb!"

"You think!"

"I do."

"Why?"

"In the first place, the wording of the telegram ain't professional."

"Oh, it ain't, ain't it?"

"And any chump would know that I could not get near my wife's room at the hospital unless those in charge allowed me to!"

"You could force 'em to leave you see your own wife!"

"That, I suppose, is what my enemy hoped I'd do. Well," concluded John as he rose from the table looking very pale, "he was a fool!"

"John!" Irene checked him as he went toward the door.

He stopped. "Well?"

"Do you—is there—who do you suspicion of playing you this here trick?"

He looked at her and her eyes could not meet his.

"I'm going to find out who did it, Irene," he quietly answered; then turned and left the room.

Irene remained sitting at the table for a long time after he had gone. "I believe he suspicions *I* had a hand in it!"

She shivered as she thought of the ominous quiet of his voice as he had said, "I'm going to find out who did it!"

"He always seems to do what he says he's going to!" she thought fearfully. "But I don't see how he can *prove* nothing on me! *I* didn't fake that there telegraph!"

She concluded, after a little further reflection upon

the situation, that it was very necessary to go to Lancaster at once for that postponed visit to a throat specialist.

An hour after John had gone to school, she locked the children into the kitchen and walked down to the postoffice to write and mail a special delivery note to Albert Wenrich at Lancaster.

That evening she announced to John that she could not defer any longer going to town to have her throat treated.

"If you can spare me the price, I'll go to-morrow morning, John."

She felt puzzled and uneasy at his extremely gentle acquiescence. His manner to her for some time past had been far too patient and kind to be satisfactorily lover-like.

The next morning being Saturday, he offered to go with her to "the Square" and put her and her satchel on the trolley car.

Now she had never before happened to go to town on a Saturday, the only day he was free to accompany her to the car, and this unprecedented circumstance found her embarrassed She manifested so unmistakably a reluctance to have him go with her that his attention became focussed upon the fact.

"My bag ain't heavy, John, and you're so busy, with all this here exter school work you're doin——"

She guessed, now, what that extra work probably was. "He sets up there writin' to Minnie, I bet you!" was her suspicion.

"I'll walk with you to the Square along," John repeated. "It's Saturday and I got time a-plenty."

"But I want to stop at home a couple minutes and see Pop and Mom, John."

"All right. I'll be at the Square with your bag till you get there a'ready."

"It ain't necessary that you waste your time."

"That's all right, Irene."

"Och, John, I can carry my own bag. I don't want for you to bother."

"It ain't no bother to me," John firmly persisted.

Irene turned away to hide the actual fear in her face at his determination; but he had glanced up and caught the look before she turned, and he knew that she must have a very urgent reason indeed for objecting to his accompanying her.

He said no more about it. But when she was ready to leave, he took her bag from her hand and started out with her.

"But, John," she protested, "I'm a-goin' to Mom's first! It will be so tiresome for you to have to wait at the Square for me!"

"You haven't time to go to your mother's. You barely have time to catch the trolley."

"Then I won't go by the trolley," she said suddenly. "I'll take the train."

"That goes only ten minutes later. You can't go first to your mother's, Irene."

"Och, well, then," she crossly surrendered as they started down the street.

"Which shall it be—trolley or train?" he asked.

"Train," she curtly answered.

"But here's your trolley standing," he pointed out as they came to the Square. "Why don't you take it?"

"I don't want to—leave us hurry to the depot over," she replied, walking so fast that he had to take long strides to keep up with her. "It takes so much longer by the trolley," she added when, having gone past the Square as though they were pursued, she slackened her pace.

"But you hardly ever go by the train, Irene—it costs double."

"There you go again—the cost, always the cost! Och, no, I don't mean that, Johnny dearie!" she hastily added. "I know you're as generous to me as you otherwise can be. But I do hate to have to think about costs all the time!"

"So do I. I don't have objections to your taking the train. I'm only wondering why you want to."

"I want to save time."

"Will you be back to-night?"

"If it don't take too long to see the doctor."

"What doctor?"

"The throat specialist I'm goin' to."

"What's his name?"

"John Wimmer! You ac' like as if you had suspicions of my not *going* to any doctor!"

John did not reply. They walked in silence to the station.

When he had bought her ticket and handed it to her, she nervously tried again to get rid of him.

"You got no need to stand 'round here waitin' for the train, John, if you don't want to."

"I would not deprive myself of the pleasure of your society sooner'n I must," he answered.

"You ain't been so anxious for my comp'ny lately that I would *notice* it any!"

Again John did not reply. It was one of Irene's trials that she could never provoke him to a quarrel. It made existence very tame.

"That way you're got of not answering to a person is awful tantalizing, John!" she complained.

"Here comes your train," he said.

She promptly lifted her face to kiss him good-bye.

"I'll see you to your seat," he told her.

"Och, you ain't got no need to do that! Here, gimme"—reaching for her bag. But he held it away.

"Come," he said, laying his hand on her arm to pilot her to the waiting train.

"Och, if you ain't!" she said helplessly, her face very flushed, her eyes rather wild, as she submitted.

He handed her up to the platform, mounted the steps after her, then led her through the aisle. The car was filled. Not a vacant seat to be had. He led the way to the forward car and here there was plenty of room. Selecting a seat on the shady side of the train, he deposited her satchel in the rack overhead, kissed her good-bye, and turned to walk away.

He had been unable to detect anything to justify her too-evident apprehension at having him with her.

But just as he was stepping off the train, he saw a man running up the street toward the station. John stopped to watch him. Just as the train started, the fellow sprang upon the steps of the rear car. He was dressed sprucely in clothes of city style. And he wore a green felt hat.

John, who had not removed his hand from the railing of the forward car (in which Irene sat), swung himself back upon it as it moved.

Without being seen by Irene, who was peering from the window in evidently anxious expectation, he took the empty seat directly behind her, and opening the newspaper which he carried, he held it widespread before his face.

In a moment, over the top of it, he saw, coming up the aisle of the train, the green felt hat—its owner looking eagerly from right to left into every seat. Spying Irene, who was still peering out of the window, he sprang to her side and touched her shoulder.

John watched their greeting—demonstrative, conspicuous. As they did not lower their voices, he could hear every word that they said as they sat together directly in front of him.

"I didn't know but that I'd find the ol' man settin' here alongside of you!" said he of the green hat. "In which case Yours Truly would have beat it back to the smoker, P. D. Q. I seen him walkin'

past the Square with you. Is that why you didn't take the trolley—because he was along with you?"

"Yes. And I had so afraid you'd gimme away by buttin' in whiles he was with me!"

"Och, gimme credit for more gumption! So long as he was along with you, I had sense enough to keep *my* distance, you bet you! I wouldn't risk spoilin' our little game by no sich false step!"

"If he'd ever get on to my larks with you on the side—good-night! But I'd die without 'em—he's so darned slow and goody-goody! It was cute of you to ketch on that I was comin' by the train when I did not take the trolley! I had awful afraid we'd miss each other altogether by John's comin' with!"

"Do you think he suspicions you—that he come along to see you off?"

"Och, no, he's so honest hisself, he thinks others are the same! He's awful slow! But, Alfred! I got bad news! Mind you, Minnie ain't *at* the Phil-delphy san——"

The noise of a passing train drowned their voices. John, to avoid discovery, rose and went to the rear car.

At Lancaster, a half hour's ride from Hessville, he watched to see whether Irene and the green hat got off; and when they did, he also got off and followed them to the hotel to which they walked. Keeping himself out of sight, he saw them register at the desk in the lobby and be taken by a bellboy upstairs on the elevator.

Then going himself to the desk he opened the register. He had noted that the only people to enter their names after Irene and her companion had been two men. So he easily found the registration for which he looked.

Mr. and Mrs Albert Wenrich, Room 102.

He spoke to the clerk. "Say, Mister, is Room 102 engaged for to-night?"

"Room 102?" repeated the clerk, glancing at his keys. "Yes. But I can give you a room just as good."

"But won't 102 be wacant by to-night?"

The clerk consulted the register. "No, it was just taken by a man and wife and paid for up to this time to-morrow. What's the matter that you want 102? We're got rooms a-plenty——"

John turned away unceremoniously and walked out of the lobby, leaving the clerk indignant and perplexed.

Returning to the station, he took the next train back to Hessville.

CHAPTER XX

JOHN'S interview with Irene on her return, on Sunday afternoon, was very quiet on his part; very shrill on hers. He had left the children at the farm to have them out of the way of "a scene." With the bait of a generous fee for their board, he had won his father's consent to their remaining there until their mother's recovery and return from the sanitarium.

Irene found him waiting for her in the sitting room as, glowing and vigorous, she came gaily into the house. Instantly, as he saw how radiant she was, the fear struck his heart that she and her accomplice had succeeded in perpetrating a scheme against Minnie and himself.

As he did not rise to greet her, she swooped down upon him to embrace him—but he did get up then and step out of her reach.

"Don't take off your wraps," he said in that quiet voice of his which meant to all who knew him, from his pupils to his own children, a determination that could not be gainsaid.

"Why not?" She stopped short, turning suddenly white. "What's up?" she demanded.

"You can't stop here, Irene. I've had your

clothes packed and sent to your mother's. It's good-bye between us. I can't have you here with my children any longer."

"Oh, I ain't fit to be near your children, ain't I? Well, then, why are you fit for 'em? Ain't you just as bad?"

"I throw no stones at you, for I live in a glass house. But our life together is over."

"Don't you fool yourself that it's over! *I* got something to say to that—whether it's over! You're got *me* to answer to—not a milk-and-water woman that leaves a man take all he wants and then turn her out when he gets tired! Och, no, not when it's me you're dealin' with, John Wimmer!"

"You must go."

"I must not either! I'm stayin' right here! You just make up your mind to that, John! For if *you* don't tell Minnie the truth, *I will!* And oncet she knows the truth, you might as *well* keep me—for she'll never come back to you!"

"Minnie shall hear the truth *from me*, as soon as she's strong enough to bear it."

"She'll hear it before she's strong enough—and she'll hear *my* wersion of it—if you don't watch out, John!"

"You see, Irene, I know, now, about you and Albert Wenrich."

"*What* do you know?" she shrilly demanded, looking startled.

"That you went with him to Lancaster yesterday

and stopped with him at the Stevens House last night."

"Oh, so you got jealous and hired a sleuth to follah me round, did you? Well, John, if Minnie adopted them methods with *you*, she'd find out something, too—ain't?"

"I didn't hire a police force to trail you."

"How did you find out—I mean, it ain't so! Your informer is Another!"

"My informant is my own eyes. *I* trailed you to Lancaster."

"Was you that jealous, John! Och, well," she said, her tone suddenly ingratiating, "you're got no need to be! Al Wenrich ain't *you*, by no means, Johnny!—not to *my* heart, beloved treas——"

"You'll have to go!"

"Look-a-here, John, I tell you you're got no need to have jealous of Wenrich!"

"I know I haven't. I couldn't be jealous of Wenrich if I tried. What you do or who you care for no longer matters to me, Irene."

"Oh, it don't, don't it? Well, I guess it matters to you if I go right aways to that there Oyster Cove and tell everything to your wife!"

"You can't get near her. I've warned them to keep you off and to give Minnie no letters but mine."

"If I can't get near her whiles she's there, I can easy get at her oncet she's out. Look at it sensible, John—if you throw me out, you'll end by havin' no

one! You don't espect Minnie to stick to you oncet she finds you out, do you?"

"I'm going to make the fight of my life to keep her!"

"Look-a-here! You treat me like this here and you'll lose your school as well as your wife! Oncet that there Hessville school board knows——"

"But I'd certainly lose my school if I kept you here after my wife is able to come back to me. And what you tell against me would be (unfortunately for you) much more against yourself!"

"Yes, that there's the woman's tough luck! And yous men *gloat* over it!"

"No—I see how unfair it is. But, Irene, why do you want me to keep you? You don't care for me—and I have nothing but my salary, which ain't enough to satisfy you. What do you hope to *get* out of staying here with me?"

Her reply broke from her impetuously, before she had time to consider and weigh it. "What I'm agoin' to get out of you, John Wimmer, is the money you and Minnie cheated off of Hen, my husband! You that wants to be so much, keepin' back from a poor widow what was by rights her own husband's! If the law won't give it to me, I'll get it my *own* way—but you'll give it to me, or I'll make you lose somepin that's more *to* you than any money!"

"How can I give you what is not mine? The money is Minnie's."

He rose with a little gesture of finality against

which Irene had learned to know there was no appeal. "Take your satchel, Irene, and leave my house."

"All right, and now you just watch what I'll do to your precious Minnie oncet I get at her! What I'll tell her will certainly open her eyes to what *you* are!—and put an end to *your* fancy little love story! Well, I guess! Oh, you make me sick!" she almost screamed as she flung herself violently out of the room and banged the door behind her.

In the solitude which followed her departure John had ample time to face and weigh every possible and probable consequence of his approaching understanding with Minnie.

He had no false sentiments as to its being his duty to confess to her all the unfaithfulness of which he had been guilty. "I'll spare her every bit of pain I can. It's *her* I got to consider—not the easing of my own conscience."

He would, for instance, shield her from the horror of learning that through all their married life he had believed himself in love with Irene.

"I'd better cut out my tongue than steal from her that happiness of the past! She shall anyhow keep *that*—whatever her future may be!"

It was, however, obviously necessary that he forestall whatever Irene might choose to tell his wife.

His complete uncertainty as to how Minnie would "take" it all made his nights sleepless, his days

haunted. Would it kill her love?—destroy all her large faith in him? He scorned to plead even to his own heart, "The woman tempted me!"

"The man that makes *that* an excuse!" he shrugged.

In his inmost soul he knew that he was not nearly so guilty a wretch as circumstances made him appear. "For if I hadn't of believed that Minnie was the same as dead—that she could never again be a wife to me, a mother to our children, the mistress of our home—if I'd had the least hope that she'd ever be herself again—I know, as surely as I know anything in this mortal life, that even such passion as drew me to Irene would not have made me go back on my marriage vows!"

As marriage between him and any other woman had been impossible while Minnie lived, he had not thought he was doing wrong in his relation to Irene so long as *she* did not feel herself harmed.

But how could he advance such reasonings and excuses to his wife? What woman on earth would consider them reasonable? The question of sex morality had not been among those "deep subjects" which he and Minnie had been wont to discuss; so he actually did not know what her "views" about it really were, and he found to his surprise that he could not even imagine.

"You never can count on Minnie's thinking just what other ones think about a thing," he reflected. "She thinks for herself."

But after all, would it be a question of what she thought, rather than what she felt? Would not her hot indignation condemn his conduct as unforgivable? Would she not surely turn him away as he had turned away Irene?—taking the children with her!

But the black desolation of such a prospect was intolerable. "I won't give her up!" he thought fiercely. "I'll keep her if I have to do it by main force! I'll fight for her as I've never fought for anything in my life! I'll hold her in my arms till she swears she'll never leave me!"

But in his heart he knew that if Minnie determined to leave him, he would be as powerless to hold her as though she had always been steel instead of velvet in his hands.

"And I wouldn't want to keep her either, if she didn't feel for staying with me!" he miserably concluded.

He felt that he could more easily bear to see her angry and indignant, to see her scorn and spurn him, than to see her grieved, stricken, heartbroken.

"After all she's gone through, that I should have to come to her with such a yarn as I've got to tell her! Just when she's creeping back to life and health again, to deal her such a blow!"

To be able to blot out the past few months he felt he would give half his life.

When at last the long waited-for summons arrived and the doctor named the very day on which he might now come to Oyster Cove, his eagerness quite

overleaped, for the time, all his doubts and misgivings.

As he walked from the little station at the Cove to the cottage hospital, he determined to put off his confession until he had made Minnie feel, through all her being, the joy of their reunion, his deep, brooding love for her, the blessedness of their life together, holding, as it did for them both, all that was beautiful and of worth in this earthly existence.

"Then when I do have to let the ax fall, she *can't* feel that it's so bad that it's got to end everything between us—she can't!"

The mental image of her which he carried to this meeting was not at all that of the young wife of his bosom, but that of the ghastly wreck she had been the last time he had seen her—bald, wrinkled, cadaverous, hollow-eyed.

"I'll find her improved, of course," he thought—but his mind's last picture of her persisted. He could not get rid of it.

As he came in sight of the cottage, he saw two people on the lawn—one of them a young woman in an invalid's reclining chair; the other a man of about his own age sitting on the ground at her side, looking up into her face, in an attitude that instantly suggested to John that they were lovers. A few steps nearer, and he recognized the man to be Doctor Conrad, the head physician of the sanitarium. His eye fell again upon the young woman and though he was not at all interested, just now, in any one but

Minnie, he was struck with the glowing beauty of the invalid.

"No wonder the doctor hangs round *that* patient!" thought John with a sigh as he noted the short gold-brown ringlets all over her head, the faint, exquisite flush in her cheeks, the sweetness of her countenance, the soft darkness of her eyes, the——

He stopped short in the path in which he was walking, his heart suddenly standing still, his knees weakening under him. That face, those features, that countenance!

He had come to meet a broken-down invalid, haggard, bald, prematurely old——

Was he going to faint? A great husky fellow like him, faint! He staggered to a tree by the path and leaned against it, still staring wildly at that picture on the lawn, a few yards distant—the young doctor sitting at the feet of his lovely patient, gazing up adoringly into her radiant face! And the patient! John had not *known* she was beautiful! A pretty little thing, yes, of course. Had she always been as beautiful as this and had he, in his idiotic infatuation for Irene, been blind to it? Or had her illness greatly changed her? That short curly hair, to be sure——

"It makes her look like a handsome little boy, by gosh! She looks more like Jacky than like herself!" thought John with fast-beating heart. "And she's mine, she's mine!"

But *why* was she gazing back so smilingly at that damned young doctor?—why were not her eyes

fastened eagerly upon the path by which her husband was coming? Why was she looking as happy as this, in the company of another man?

The fiercest jealousy he had ever known gripped him. This doctor, a gentleman, a polished, experienced man of the city—for months, now, Minnie had been used to his society. Surely she would find her husband crude and common beside such as he! Had their long separation cooled her love for him? A primitive impulse to leap upon that sprucely dressed, elegant-looking physician and smash him, surged up in John's blood.

"I never suspected before that Minnie could be a flirt!" he said to himself bitterly.

Then he remembered, with great heaviness of soul how little right he had to condemn her "flirting."

"I've done a lot worse'n just flirt yet!"

Never before in all the half-dozen years of his marriage had he had a moment's jealousy of Minnie. He had, to be sure, valued her, treasured her as his life's best blessing; but he had always been absolutely sure of her. And never had she seemed so desirable, so priceless to him, as in this glaring light of another man's admiration of her.

From the intensity of his own feelings against that sleek doctor he suddenly realized what he might expect Minnie to feel when she learned of his "interlude" with Irene.

"I've lost her!" he thought, his heart like lead in

his breast. "This doctor! My behaviour with Irene! I've lost her!"

Despair laid hold upon him. He felt an overpowering inclination to turn away without making his presence known—without interrupting that apparently happy communion of two kindred souls there on the lawn—and returning to Hessville.

But he thought of the children. "For their sakes maybe, in spite of everything, she may be willing to come back to me."

And though he did not want her that way—if she did not come for his sake, too—yet after a while, perhaps, he might win back her love.

Well, the only thing for it was to go ahead, now that he was here, and try it out; to put his fate to the test.

CHAPTER XXI

AN HOUR later he was sitting where Doctor Conrad had sat, on the lawn at Minnie's feet, his arm across her knees, her hand clasped in his, his eyes drinking in all her sweetness and content—while they talked and talked of all that was in their hearts, all that they had not written in their letters, all the little things that one could say only in closest touch.

The great joy with which she had welcomed him had instantly and completely reassured him that she still loved him—loyal little Minnie! And in this wonderful hour of reunion the cloud of the "confession" he had to make receded so far into the background as almost to disappear. He held his wife in his arms, he had her love, they were happy—why disturb her tranquillity and make her suffer? Why not take his chances that Irene would, for her own sake, remain silent?

But he could not hope that she would. And he felt that if Minnie heard of his defection from his own lips, it would be easier for her to forgive him.

Not, however, to-day, would he speak the words that must blight their happiness, dim this girlish brightness so beautiful in his sight, bring horror into

eyes that now mirrored love and trust. To-morrow morning before he left for home he might force himself to the ordeal. To-day——

"'Let joy be unconfined!'" he suddenly said aloud.

And Minnie responded, "It will be—once I'm home with you and the children again!"

"I must say," said John ruefully, "you looked awful well satisfied with that doctor sitting here alongside of you, before I came. I watched you for a while before I made my presence known to you. I'd have thought, Minnie darling, you'd have been too anxious to see *me* to take such interest in another one!"

"But it was because I was expecting you that I was so happy. I was talking to him about you."

"You were?"

"Yes, I'm all the time talking about you and the children. Oh, John, I can't wait much longer to see them!"

"Ain't there any one here that you'll miss, once you get home?" asked John jealously.

"Oh, yes, I'll miss Miss Kentnor, my nurse. She's been so good to me! I have never known a woman like her, John!—such an educated woman that way, and so ladylike and genteel!"

"So I gathered from her letters to me about you, Minnie. But—is there anything—any one—else you'll miss maybe?"

"Well, yes, I'll miss Doctor Conrad. He and I have come to be good friends. Does that sound

funny to you, John, to hear me say I'm a friend to another man? I know it would look awful funny in Hesswille. But, John, I see now that Hesswille is a little narrow in some ways. Why shouldn't the doctor and I be good friends? I'd like to have a lot of friends like him and Miss Kentnor."

"Only so it stops at friendship, Minnie!" said John darkly. "It ain't so easy to make it stop just where you want it to stop. Anyhow for a *man* it ain't easy."

"But why should a person ever want to stop the forces of nature?"

"Why, Minnie!" exclaimed John, shocked. "You're not believing in free love, are you?"

"Do you believe only in *legal* love, John? *Is* there such a thing as legal love?"

"Yes, there *is!*" returned John hotly. "Who's been putting such ideas into your head anyhow?'

"Well, the doctor and I had some conwersations on that subject."

"A funny kind of a doctor, I must say, to be holdin' such improper conwersations with his young lady patients!" said John indignantly.

"They weren't improper, John—they were very inter*est*ing and instructive. We mustn't be narrow that way, if we can otherwise help it, dear. Life's a lot broader than I thought it was before I was sick."

"I hope you haven't got so broadminded that you've got away a little from *me*, Minnie!"

"If I've moved away from you a little, I'll soon pull you along after me up," she smiled.

"Minnie! I saw the way that doctor was looking at you! I believe—yes, I'm darned if I don't—that fellah's had the nerve to fall in love with you!"

"Sometimes I think so, too. There for a while I was sure of it—and it made things wery pleasant and helped pass the time. I like having a man in love with me."

"Why, Minnie, how you talk! And you a married woman yet! If I didn't know how damned innocent you are, I'd think—I wouldn't know what *to* think!"

"But so long as I'm not in love with him, John, it can't make you any difference."

"Are you sure you're not in love with him a little?—him that is so much more genteel and educated than what I am?"

"Oh, John!" she laughed. "*He's* not the big, strong, splendid man that you are! Don't you mind what I wrote you?—that the more I see of other ones, the more I see what a fine, upstanding man *I* have!"

John's big chest heaved a deep, long sigh of relief. "It sounds awful good to me, Minnie, to hear you say it! But I don't deserve it, you know. Mebby I ain't what you think me. I'm sure I don't know what you do think me! A little god on a pedestal, I'm afraid!"

"No, not a god—but god-like sometimes, John."

"I wish that was true, dear—for your sake—because you deserve the best. But it ain't true."

In his heart, however, John did not feel himself to be a criminal. He believed, now, that he always had loved his wife; that what had drawn him to Irene had been lust, not love, and that inasmuch as she, being what she was, had not been injured by him (such was his highly masculine logic!), he had not really been guilty. He had, of course, been a fool—but surely not a criminal; else every man that walked was a criminal!

It was not, however, what he thought of himself, but what Minnie would think of him when she knew, that mattered. And it was this great doubt which, during the long hours of that night, as he lay in the room adjoining his wife's, kept him awake and suffering.

The next morning as he sat with her in her sunny bedroom during the few hours before he must leave her and go home, some questions of hers precipitated his "confession."

"Does Irene make you and the children comfortable, John?"

"Well, to be sure, she ain't the housekeeper you are, Minnie."

"She never had it to do—her mother and aunt always did all. I guess she's got my house all through-other!" said Minnie anxiously.

"Don't worry about that, dear. It'll be cleaned from garret to cellar before we bring you home.

Jennie and Mrs. Johnson, the coloured lady, will do it."

"Won't Irene help?"

"She's gone, Minnie."

"Gone! But why did she leave before I was well enough to come home?"

"She—she got tired of it. She hates housework. She don't like children. She's wery fond of pleasure. It was slow for her with us," said John rather incoherently, hating the necessity for evasion and subterfuge; he wanted his mind and soul to be an open page to his wife, as hers were to him.

"But have you another housekeeper, John, to take care of you till I come home?"

"Mrs. Johnson, the coloured lady you mind of, is coming to stay. And I'm going to keep her for a good while after you do get home—maybe all the time. I know, now, that you always had too much work to do, Minnie. Never again am I going to leave you do all the work by yourself. We're going to hire. I'm getting one hundred dollars a month after this term."

"Oh, John, that's grand!—that the school board appreciates so what a fine teacher you are!"

"Now if that ain't just like you, Minnie dear, to see *that* side of it—the honour to me—sooner'n the practical adwantage of it to you! It's ten dollars a month more for you to buy gew-gaws!" he reminded her.

"For Sophie!" she cried, her eyes sparkling. "I

do like to doll her up!—that's what the nurse calls dressing fancy," she explained. "'I must go doll up,' she says when she's expecting her gentleman friend. Or she'll say, 'Well, I must go now and put on my glad rags.' Glad *rags* yet, John! Yes, that's what she calls her best frock! Ain't it funny? But they all think *I* talk funny. Sometimes they can't understand me right. One day when the doctor had to take out some stitches, the thought of it made me have so sick, I said, 'Leave me wrench out my mouth!' And the doctor and the nurse laughed at me and Doctor Conrad said, 'It's me that's going to do the wrenching, Mrs. Wimmer!'—for the stitches were awful hard to take out, John!"

"Poor little Minnie! How can I ever make up to you for all you've suffered!"

"But you've suffered, too! It shows so in your face how you've suffered!"

Was this the moment, he wondered, when he should admit to her that his suffering had not been unmitigated, had not been without its consolations? It was a bitter thing to have to do! To deliberately hurt a thing so frail, so tender, so precious to him! It seemed as impossible as it would be to lift his hand and strike her.

"John," she said presently, a touch of anxiety in her voice, "I've been awful anxious about something that I didn't like to bother you with—but now I'm going to ask you."

"Well, dear?"

"Tell me truly—*was* Irene ugly to the children sometimes? I've been so afraid of that! She's so ugly-dispositioned that way!—and all for herself—I I knew she'd never have the patience with children that you've got to have to be fair to them. To be fair to children you darsen't think of your own comfort and conwenience. And Irene never thought of anything else."

"How do you know her so well? You never were friends."

"We went to school together, you know. She used to make fun of the clothes I wore that I had to make for myself because I hadn't any one to make them for me. And she'd taunt me about father's healing and ask me why he didn't pray some new paint on our old house, or some new shoes on my feet. Oh! She used to torment me awful! It's been a worry to me, John, that she had care of the children! But of course I knew you had to have *some* one to keep house for you, so I didn't say anything. But I'm glad she's not there any more. *Was* she ugly to them?"

"Sometimes, Minnie. But of course I did all I could to shield them."

"You poor John! You did have an awful time, didn't you?"

"Ye—es."

"Where's Irene gone?"

"I don't know."

"Why did she go, John?"

"Look here, Minnie, you know that I love you, don't you? You know that I have always loved you?"

"Nothing could shake my faith in your love, John."

"Nothing? Are you sure?"

"How *could* I doubt it?"

"But, Minnie—try to understand it if you can!—during some of those long, long weeks when you were like dead to me—when you didn't know me, didn't remember anything, your mind a dead blank—when I thought you'd always be like that—Irene came—she lived with us—she was young and strong and handsome—and, Minnie, my dear!"

"What, John?"

"Irene became my mistress!"

It was bewilderment, rather than the horror which he looked for, that she seemed to feel at first. She couldn't take it in, could not imagine such a thing as possible. Her comments were vague, incoherent, almost trivial.

"But just yesterday you were indignant because you thought Doctor Conrad was in love with me!"

"I'm indignant with myself, too, Minnie!"

"But such a coarse, common person as Irene!—Henry's widow!—*you*, John!"

Through her eyes it did look to John unspeakably sordid. He could not plead to her that there had been at first for him an ideal side to it; that he had, for a while, romantically idealized and really loved

Irene, such glamour had her personal lure thrown over her coarseness and "commonness." That fact, far from mitigating his conduct, would surely make it hold for Minnie a disloyalty such as she would not, perhaps, find in mere sordidness.

"I didn't know you were so weak, John! I've always thought you were a tower of strength!"

"A leaning tower is what you'll have to think me after this, Minnie! You know, now, that I'm human like other men!"

"Oh, I always knew *that*."

"You did, did you?"

"But I never thought you could be common! I always have known that you were *fine* inside, John. So different from all the other men in Hesswille. That's why I loved you. But this thing you tell me is so common that it makes me feel repulsive!"

"Oh, Minnie! Don't tell me that!"

"You see, I can't seem to understand what *could* draw you to Irene. Of course I know it wasn't love—you're not the sort of man to love a person like her. So what you did feel for her, wonders me!"

"I wonder at it, too, now, Minnie."

"I ain't jealous, John—I couldn't have jealous of a woman like Irene. I just couldn't. She and I are too different. I could only have jealous of a person that was worthy for you, John."

"Minnie, dear, you have always made a god of me. Well, you have lost an object of worship—but

maybe I've gained spiritually in losing a worshipper! It was hard to keep from becoming a prig, living with a person that thought you were more than human, dear!"

"No, John, I don't think I have thought better of you than you deserved. To be sure, I've seen only the best in you, and maybe I've overlooked some other things that never came up so conspicuous that I *could* see them. But that best that I saw was *there!*"

"Do you mean, Minnie, that your faith in me is not shaken?" he asked wonderingly.

"I know you love me," she said simply.

"Bless you for that!" he cried as he knelt at her side and buried his face on her knees. "I'll never, never fail you again, Minnie!"

"To be sure, John, a thing like this you tell me could never disturb the deeps of *our* love!"

"I believe, Minnie dearest, you've known me better than I've known myself!" said John.

It was a comfortable belief and he tried to hold fast to it.

THE END

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